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The other side of the tracks: railroads, race, and the performance of unity in nineteenth-century American entertainment

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THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS:
RAILROADS, RACE, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF UNITY IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Theatre

by
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Acknowledgments

Thirteen years ago, my high school English teacher assigned an “Oregon Project” in which students were required to research and write a paper on anything found in Oregon. Little did I know when I chose to research a small Oregon cemetery that I would go back to that cemetery as a graduate student, drawn to the grave of a Chinese man who had been buried as an “Indian Unknown.” My curiosity about that Chinese man grew into additional research on railroad construction and the plight of Chinese-Americans in the late nineteenth century. I will always be grateful to Mrs. Kissinger for cultivating my writing skills and for modeling for me the joy of research. Thanks also to Jo Lewis, Becky Ankeny, and Bill Jolliff, who contributed to my education and inspired me to pursue graduate studies.

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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THIS TRAIN IS BOUND FOR GLORY; OR, “THE TRACKS THAT LAID THEMSELVES”: THE ROLE OF POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN THE ERASURE OF RAILROAD LABORERS.....	13
3. “I BEEN WORKIN’ IN THE LAUNDRY”: THE ROLE OF PERFORMANCE IN THE RECASTING OF MINORITY RAILROAD LABORERS AS MENIAL LABOR.....	69
4. DIVIDE AND CONQUER; OR, “MY WHITE, BLACK, AND YELLOW BOYS”: ETHNIC JOCKEYING IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN ENTERTAINMENT.....	132
5. SELLING THE “OLD WEST”: THE NEGOTIATION OF NOSTALGIA AND GUILT IN TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PERFORMANCES OF THE RAILROAD AND THE AMERICAN FRONTIER.....	166
6. “A MINGLED YARN”: FINDING UNITY IN DIFFERENCE.....	213
WORKS CITED.....	223
APPENDIX: PERMISSION FORMS.....	233
VITA.....	236

List of Figures

2.1. Russell’s Photograph Taken at Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869.....	21
2.2. Poster From <i>Under the Gaslight</i>	36
2.3. “Central Pacific Railroad – Chinese Laborers At Work”.....	55
2.4. “What Shall We Do With Our Boys?”.....	56
2.5. “Watch Us Pull His Tail”.....	57
2.6. "Rough on Rats".....	58
2.7. “The Chinese Problem Solved By Peerless Wringer”.....	59
2.8. <i>The Daily Stage</i> , October 6, 1880.....	65
3.1. “A Great Big Chickapoo Chief”.....	88
3.2. “An Unsightly Object”.....	99
3.3. “All-A-Same, or The Chinee Laundryman”.....	107
3.4. “Uncle Sam’s Troublesome Bedfellows”.....	130
5.1. Visitors Watch a Reenactment of the Golden Spike Ceremony at the Golden Spike National Historic Site.....	178
5.2. The Narrator (Telegraph Operator) Signals the Arrival of the Union Pacific Locomotive.....	180
5.3. “Stanford” Addresses the Crowd.....	180
5.4. The Narrator Requests a “Cheer”.....	181

Abstract

Nineteenth-century Americans took great pride in the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869. This pride was not solely grounded in the knowledge that a grand, technological feat had been accomplished. When placed in its historical context, the celebration surrounding the completion of the railroad suggests a clear and visible statement of unity following a bitter and divisive civil war. The transcontinental railroad of 1869 undeniably unified the States. But any railroad simultaneously unites and divides, for while the tracks serve to link distant locations, they also produce a literal and metaphorical division in the communities through which they travel: “the other side of the tracks.”

This study examines the intersection of performance, history, and politics in the historical glorification of the railroad and the simultaneous erasure and degradation of the men who built it. Specifically, this dissertation examines dozens of nineteenth-century plays, songs, and cartoons, exploring the power of performance in cementing a history of the railroad and the complicity of performance in a political movement that aimed to devalue the contribution of Irish, Mormon, and Black laborers and to expel the Chinese from the United States. This study ultimately engages the larger question of how performance can be used to shape collective memory, history, and a national definition of what it means to be a part of the “United” States of America.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Herodotus thought of historians as the guardians of memory, the memory of glorious deeds. I prefer to see historians as the guardians of the skeletons in the cupboard of the social memory . . . , which reveal weaknesses in grand and not-so-grand theories. There used to be an official called the 'Remembrancer.' The title was actually a euphemism for debt collector. The official's job was to remind people of what they would have liked to forget. One of the most important functions of the historian is to be a Remembrancer.¹

I begin my work with this quote by Peter Burke because I believe it captures the spirit of the task I have determined to do. Revealed in Burke's eloquent passage are two fundamentally different approaches to history. The one, espoused by Herodotus, views history as a record of "glorious deeds" that, when reviewed by the historian, will tell the story of a people. The other, embraced by Burke, approaches history by examining those not-so-glorious deeds, those memories that tell a darker, more honest story. The aim of the present study is to examine nineteenth-century representations of the transcontinental railroad and the laborers who built it. As I set out upon this project, I had no idea how "divided" an undertaking it would be. I anticipated that I would find images of railroad laborers adjacent to images of the railroad. What I quickly discovered is that images of railroad laborers do not exist in conjunction with the railroad. Rather, the laborers represented in nineteenth-century popular entertainment are distanced from the railroad, erased from the "glorious deed" of railroad construction, and relegated to the "cupboard of social memory."

This study, then, will explore the ways in which nineteenth-century popular entertainers embraced the role of Herodotus in their exaltation of the railroad while they simultaneously pushed to the margins aspects of the railroad that they did not find worthy of glorification;

¹ Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Cambridge, UK: Polity P, 1997) 59.

specifically, these entertainers reflected and perpetuated a belief that the railroad's ethnic laborers were unworthy both of recognition and of inclusion in the *United States of America*.

Nineteenth-century Americans took great pride in their technological accomplishments: the cotton gin, the telegraph, the steamboat. The railroad, however, seemed larger than any of these other accomplishments. It was an engineering marvel, like the cotton gin. It could carry messages across the nation, like the telegraph. And it could transport people and cargo from one place to another, like the steamboat. Yet the railroad was all three of these things at the same time. It was perhaps the most visible and relied upon technological advance of the nineteenth century.

American pride in the railroad, however, was not solely grounded in its technological accomplishments. When placed in its historical context, the completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 suggests a clear and visible statement of unity following a bitter and divisive civil war. The ceremonial golden spike that was driven into the tracks in Promontory, Utah in May of 1869 served to unify the East with the West, just as Lee's surrender at Appomattox restored a semblance of unity between the North and the South. While not all Americans desired to be unified, the railroad could be seen as a symbol of unity to those who sought reconciliation. And to those who didn't particularly seek or depend on reconciliation, the railroad offered a more convenient existence through speedier shipment and increased mobility.

The transcontinental railroad of 1869 undeniably unified the States. But any railroad simultaneously unites and divides, for while the tracks serve to link distant locations, they also produce a literal and metaphorical division in the communities through which they travel. "The other side of the tracks" (or the variant, "the wrong side of the tracks") has become a distinct aspect of virtually every community in this nation; even when railroad companies have

discontinued service or physically removed tracks from their lines, townspeople still refer to the under-privileged as those who dwell on “the other side of the tracks.” This euphemism is laden with meaning, with "unmentionable" images; one can only imagine what goes on across the tracks. Yet, the collapse of these "unmentionables" into a relatively innocuous phrase allows the characteristics of the "other side" – the pain, beauty, accomplishments, mistreatments, and worth – to remain hidden from those who do not wish to see them. "The other side of the tracks," then, is precisely the location of Burke's "cupboard of social memory," precisely the site where the skeletons of history (and of the present) can be safely tucked away, ensuring that visitors down the main street of American history will see only the "glorious deeds" of this mythical village.

This study examines the intersection of performance, history, and politics in the historical glorification of the railroad and the simultaneous erasure and degradation of the men who built it. Many studies have been done on the history of American railroads. Several scholars have addressed the theatrical representation of minority cultures in nineteenth-century America. Much has also been written on the significance of the railroad as transportation for touring shows. While all of these studies are useful in expanding the amount of information available to researchers, they do not speak to the power of performance in cementing a history of the railroad, nor do they address the complicity of performance in a political movement that aimed to devalue the contribution of Irish, Mormon, and African-American laborers and to expel the Chinese from the United States. The present study aims to explore the ways in which popular entertainment utilized the railroad as an iconic image of unity, while at the same time writers, artists, and performers were complicit in a larger movement to create divisions among the immigrant groups who labored to create the very unity they were later excluded from claiming for themselves.

This dissertation will explore a variety of "texts" culled from nineteenth-century entertainment. These "texts" are performative in that they were likely viewed by an audience – either at the theatre, in the variety hall, in local saloons, or in mass-produced advertising images. They were written or created with the intent to be viewed and consumed by a mass audience. Specifically, I will be examining "legitimate" dramas, frontier melodramas, popular music, minstrel sketches, vaudeville acts, advertising images, and political cartoons. As Foucault and others have pointed out, these texts can reveal much about the culture that produced them, for the ideologies and values of a society inform every text created within the culture. Musicologist Victor Greene suggests that, in fact, texts from popular entertainment may provide a clearer picture of life in a given historical era than do the "historical texts" recorded and preserved for future generations. Greene writes that popular songs and entertainment provide "a valuable method for not only composers and performers to express points of view but also more importantly for scholars to learn the sentiments of ordinary people."² Because songs, plays, and variety acts were frequently created and performed by "ordinary people," and because they were consumed and supported by an audience of "ordinary people," it is worthwhile to consider what popular entertainment might reveal about mainstream American culture in the nineteenth century. Jeffrey D. Mason maintains that it is in these cultural texts that a society defines itself:

[T]he expression of a culture – the art, the music, the literature, the history, even the arrangement and decoration of our cities and homes, or the nature of our celebrations; or to put it another way, the narrative and the ways in which we choose to shape our experience – serves to define, defend, and affirm a concept of nation.³

² Victor Greene, *A Singing Ambivalence: American Immigrants Between Old World and New, 1830-1930* (Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 2004) ix.

³ Jeffrey D Mason and J. Ellen Gainor, *Performing America: Cultural Nationalism in American Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1999) 1.

In addition to the performative texts themselves, this dissertation will explore techniques through which popular performance (theatrical, musical, and visual) was used to shape the American ideal of “unity” by crafting a history of the railroad that suited their definition of unity. This “unity” was, in fact, a very limited use of the term. Unity for a majority of nineteenth century Americans, meant that “Americans” stuck together, stood with one another against any threat to “America.” “America” referred not to the land itself but rather to a group of people who believed they had rightful ownership of the land – those who enjoyed the benefits of Manifest Destiny. For the most part, then, “America” was a nation of white individuals of European descent. Native tribes – though indigenous to America, did not belong in “America.” Likewise, Black slaves (and ultimately ex-slaves) and non-European immigrants did not belong in this mythical “America.” Unity, then, for these “Americans,” was a homogenous stand against any person, principality, or ideology that might threaten their perceived right to control the future of the nation. Given this understanding of “unity,” it is not surprising that nineteenth century performances of railroad history neglect to acknowledge the accomplishments of any worker who did not fit the narrow mold of “American.”

This history of the railroad, then, is riddled with absence. Un-American laborers (i.e., Black, Chinese, and, to a certain extent, Irish) do not appear in performative accounts of the railroad. Mason suggests that

the struggle over boundaries that pervades the performance of “America” comes down to making claims and denying them, or to establishing “American” and “other.” This contest can lead to a negativist strategy for asserting one’s “American” status by displacing, relocating, or actually erasing the adversary.⁴

Thus by removing ethnic laborers from railroad history, popular entertainers were assigning these laborers an “Un-American” status.

⁴ Mason 234.

An examination of this process of staging a history of the railroad that simultaneously promises and limits unity will shed light on the larger question of how performance can be used to shape collective memory, history, and a national definition of what it means to be a part of the "United" States of America.

Methodology

I believe that fascinating historical moments can be located in the intersection of literary texts, historical documents, and theoretical frameworks. In fact, I do not think it is possible to study a historical event without consulting countless "texts" from a wide variety of sources. Foucault, in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, suggests that historical texts are more than mere attempts at recording or capturing memory. Rather, Foucault argues that in the process of recognizing and formulating documentation of a given time or place, a society is *creating* and *shaping* a history and a collective identity:

[H]istory is the work expended on material documentation (books, texts, accounts, registers, acts, buildings, institutions, laws, techniques, objects, customs, etc.) that exists, in every time and place, in every society, either in a spontaneous or in a consciously organized form. The document is not the fortunate tool of a history that is primarily and fundamentally *memory*; history is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked.⁵

If a historian wishes to grasp a more honest picture of what really happened during a given time period, then, s/he might look beyond the "scripted" and "recorded" histories located in official texts. Indeed by looking to the unofficial "texts" of a society (the plays, the songs, the poems, the artwork), a historian might gain a grittier understanding of a historical era. In the process, s/he might also be in a position to observe the ethos of that society and the system by which they scripted their "official" history.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 7.

Peter Burke, in his book *Varieties of Cultural History*, supports Foucault's notion of a complicated system of history-making:

Remembering the past and writing about it no longer seem the innocent activities they were once taken to be. Neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases historians are learning to take account of conscious or unconscious selection, interpretation, and distortion. In both cases they are coming to see the process of selection, interpretation and distortion as conditioned, or at least influenced, by social groups.⁶

Yet if a society records its memories selectively, and if historians approach these selected memories from a position of "conditioned distortion," how can any historian come close to understanding peoples of different times and places? If, as Burke writes, "all of us have access to the past (like the present) only via the categories and schemata . . . of our own culture"⁷ what is the point of a historical study in which we can never really see past our own systems of knowledge and *a priori* to the truth of another time and place?

In his seminal essay, "The Burden of History," Hayden White offers a way out of this conundrum by reminding us that finding "the truth of another time and place" should not necessarily be the aim of today's historian:

In the world in which we daily live, anyone who studies the past "as an end in itself" must appear as either an antiquarian, fleeing from the problems of the present into a purely personal past, or a kind of cultural necrophile, that is, one who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living. The contemporary historian has to establish the value of the study of the past, not as "an end in itself," but as a way of providing perspectives on the present that contribute to the solution of problems peculiar to our own time.⁸

Rather than attempt a purely scientific look at the past, White urges historians to merge the world of scientific fact with the world of art, to artfully apply the study of the past to our understanding of today, and *vice versa*. White argues that the historian should join the intellectual and artistic

⁶ Burke 44.

⁷ Burke 45-46.

⁸ Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5.2 (1966): 125.

worlds in which s/he lives, for it is only in that world that the historian will find the extraordinary and electric potential in history. He goes on to suggest that “[t]he methodological ambiguity of history offers opportunities for creative comment on the past and present that no other discipline enjoys.”⁹

Thus, I approach this historical study from a shifting foundation. I understand that it is ultimately impossible to know the “truth” of what “really” happened in the nineteenth century. I also recognize that there are “many correct views” about history. What I attempt, then, is a historical study that allows for multiple perspectives, multiple voices, and multiple conclusions. Like White, I attempt to engage the ambiguity of history in such a way that I can allow the present to tell the story of the past, and the past to tell the story of the present. Like Foucault, I come to the study of history aware of the role society plays in the “scripting” of historical texts and documents. And like Burke, I approach my study with a keen sense of my role as a “Remembrancer.” Yet, in my attempts to expose the skeletons in the cupboard of railroad history, I must take care not to build an “inverted” railroad in which the divisions between “good/worthy” and “bad/dismissible” remain solidly in place and the players have merely switched sides. To put it another way, I am attempting to view railroad history from *both* sides of the tracks, to honor the complexities of railroad history.

While embracing my role as a “Remembrancer” in the writing of this document, I must also be mindful not to limit myself to one historical approach or theoretical metaphor. White offers a word of warning (and of liberation) to historians:

There is no such thing as a *single* correct view of any object under study but there are *many* correct views, each requiring its own style of representation. . . . [W]e should recognize that *what constitutes the facts themselves* is the problem that the historian, like the artist, has tried to solve in the choice of the metaphor by which he orders his world, past, present, and future. We should ask only that the

⁹ White 133.

historian show some tact in the use of his governing metaphors: that he neither overburden them with data nor fail to use them to their limit; that he respect the logic implicit in the mode of discourse he has decided upon; and that, when his metaphor begins to show itself unable to accommodate certain kinds of data, he abandon that metaphor and seek another, richer, and more inclusive metaphor than that with which he began.¹⁰

In the following pages, then, I will act as a Remembrancer, searching for the skeletons and faces in the shadows of nineteenth-century American railroad history and performance. Yet I will also leave myself the freedom to explore other metaphors, other ways to engage the past and the present.

Chapter Overviews

Railroad imagery burst onto the stage in 1828 with George Washington Parke Custis's *The Rail Road* and continued to occupy crucial and spectacular moments in the decades to come. During these years, the American stage served as a showcase for the railroad. Audiences, many of whom relied on a railroad to transport them to the theatre or to transport the theatre to them, were offered intricate images of the "Iron Horse" in plays such as *Under the Gaslight* (1867), *The Main Line* (1886), and *The Ninety and Nine* (1902). Over time, these images cemented the reputation of the steam engine – and also the technological prowess of America. Yet these images offered more than mere praise of an engineering feat.

Through careful application of railroad images, nineteenth century playwrights, songwriters, and artists crafted a history of the railroad that would last for decades in the minds of many Americans. Railroad buffs certainly recall the photograph taken on May 10, 1869 as the Union Pacific and Central Pacific lines met in Promontory, Utah. Some may even have seen the paintings of the same scene, or read the poems written in honor of the grand occasion. Even those who do not consider themselves railroad enthusiasts most likely recall singing “I’ve been

¹⁰ Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5.2 (1966): 130-131.

working on the railroad” in grade school or watching a television western in which the steam engine barrels across the screen. Thus, most Americans have bought into an image, a history of the American railroad that praises American ingenuity and envisions a unified nation.

This history, however, does not reside solely in the songs, plays, and visual images that represent the Iron Horse, for much of the reality of railroad construction in the United States is not located in the plays that showcase a steam engine or in the illustrations that paint a picture of an engine of unity. Thus, I must also explore plays and entertainments that, on the surface, have nothing at all to do with the railroad. For just as Chinese laborers were excluded from the famous celebratory photograph at Promontory Summit in May of 1869, they were also excluded from railroad images in popular entertainment. Their fellow laborers, the Irish, the Blacks, and the Mormons, while linked to the railroad slightly more frequently, were similarly moved to the margins in this staged history of the transcontinental railroad. Thus, in order to examine images both of the railroad and of those who laid the tracks, I must explore a broader spectrum of nineteenth-century works.

Chapter Two begins with an analysis of the performative qualities of railroad construction, as it was "played" and "scripted" in newspapers across the nation, and moves on to an examination of plays, songs, and illustrations that glorify the image of the Iron Horse. In addition to analyzing the power of these performances in shaping a collective national history of the railroad, I also address the "selective" nature of this history. It cannot be pure coincidence, for example, that no Chinese and very few Irish and Blacks are present in the plays that showcase the grandeur of the railroad. This chapter will conclude with an examination of a movement within popular entertainment to participate directly and indirectly in a larger political campaign against Chinese immigration.

Chapter Three addresses some more subtle ways in which playwrights, songwriters, and artists reflected, participated in, and, in some cases, perpetuated the xenophobic culture that was responsible for so many exclusionary policies. By presenting "type" characters that are distanced from the railroad, effeminized, and generally stripped of any power, popular entertainers of the nineteenth century succeeded in cleverly separating the Irish, Blacks, Mormons, and Chinese from the promise of unity that these groups labored to achieve.

Chapter Four speaks to the ways in which nineteenth-century popular entertainment reflected and fueled antagonistic relationships between members of the various ethnic groups that built the nation's network of rails. Indeed, the plays, songs, and illustrations that are examined in Chapter Four reveal a clearly constructed racial hierarchy that divides rather than unifies and that ensures that no collective resistance will threaten the privileged position of the "American citizens" (i.e., "whites") at the top of the pecking order.

After an exploration of the ways in which nineteenth-century popular entertainment participated in a national "scripting" of railroad history and in the larger formulation of a national definition of "unity," Chapter Five brings the discussion into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries by considering the attempts of historians and artists to rectify, modify, or reify the images of nineteenth century immigrant laborers and the railroad they built. In an effort to examine those popular entertainments that have a large audience, this chapter examines a broader spectrum of performative texts, including television and museums. In some cases, the new images presented in contemporary performances serve to re-unite the railroad with its builders. In a few cases, though, the performance of railroad history still pushes to the margins those minorities who labored to ensure a definition of unity that they themselves would not see.

Finally, I will offer in Chapter Six a conclusion that reflects on the ways in which performance can be used to unify and to divide. This chapter will focus on the potential for performance to equalize historical narratives and expand the definition and reality of unity, giving equal "stage time" to cultures and individuals who exist on "the other side of the tracks." Perhaps new performances of the railroad have not yet re-written its history in a way that reveals the complexities of construction, unity, and survival. Yet we can learn from the re-scripting of railroad history. We can discover what techniques have succeeded in revealing multiple and sometimes contradictory narratives; and we can learn what approaches to performance have worked to reinforce a grand narrative. Using these insights, we can begin to analyze the ways in which we ourselves are performing history and defining unity for future generations. And we can begin to explore the role of performance as a "Remembrancer."

Chapter 2

This Train Is Bound For Glory; or, “The Tracks That Laid Themselves”: The Role of Popular Entertainment in the Erasure of Railroad Laborers

The scene: A train station on the Great Western and Pacific Air Line Railroad. A wooden platform hugs the station building and abuts a portion of the single track that crosses the stage from right to left. In the center of the stage, a second line of tracks branches off the first. Telegraph poles and wires run along the tracks and to the station house. In the background, a distant track winds its way along the side of a mountain, is carried across a deep ravine by a trestle, and finally exits the left side of the stage. In this stage picture from Henry C. DeMille’s *The Main Line* (1886) the audience sees the grandeur and glory of the railroad in the western United States, a railroad that stands as a tribute to American engineering, American ingenuity, and America’s Manifest Destiny. The imposing mountainous west has been “tamed” by the power of the Iron Horse. Evoking beauty, pride, and potential, the scene typifies many pictorial, musical, and stage images of the railroad in the nineteenth century. It is a picture of which Herodotus would be proud – a grand scale, a glorious feat. The picture is typical, however, not just for what it *shows* but also for what it does *not* show, for the “skeletons” that have been left in the closet; for in this image, as in so many images of the railroad in the last half of the nineteenth century, there is not a single depiction of the people who built the railroad. While *The Main Line* and similar popular entertainments capitalize on the railroad as a symbol of power and pride, they do so without including images of the Irish, Black, Mormon or Chinese men who made the railroad possible. Nevertheless, popular songs and illustrations in nineteenth-century America participated in and helped to codify a rhetoric of the railroad in which the Iron Horse represented American accomplishment.

The Railroad as Performance

For a number of reasons, the railroad was an ideal symbol of unity, an image screaming to be included in plays, songs, and illustrations. The railroad was the technological and engineering feat of the century. It quickly became part of the daily (or at least weekly) lives of everyday Americans, and would have been immediately recognizable to any nineteenth-century audience. Yet there is a more significant rationale for a playwright, songwriter, or artist to employ the image of the railroad as a symbol of unity; the railroad was *already* an established icon of unity. Journalists and politicians had already succeeded in transforming what might have been the mundane and dirty task of railroad construction into a nationwide extravaganza. Playwrights, musicians, and artists did not have to designate for their audiences what the railroad represented in their plays and songs, for these audiences had spent several years watching the development and significance of the railroad in the newspapers of the day. Indeed, the construction of the first transcontinental railroad was in and of itself a performance of unity, at least unity for some.

The dream of a nation united by rails preceded the War Between the States. As early as 1838, enterprising investors and politicians were at work devising a feasible plan for the implementation of a transcontinental railroad. Several bills funding railroad construction were introduced to Congress in the 1840s, but none of them passed due to Congress's inability to decide upon a route. In 1853, the government allotted \$150,000 to find the best route from west to east.¹ Predictably, representatives from southern states favored a route in which the railroad would travel from San Francisco to the Atlantic coast via a southern route closer to the Mexican border; and representatives from the northern states preferred a route that connected San

¹ Rebecca Cooper Winter, "Eastward to Promontory," Central Pacific Railroad Museum. Online. 27 January 2005, 2-3.

Francisco with Omaha and Baltimore. In a legislative battle that prefigured the bloody battle to come, the North and South would not compromise. It was not until the South seceded from the Union that a route was decided upon, the northern route, of course.²

The Pacific Railway Act of 1862 and the Second Pacific Railway Act of 1864 established the terms for railroad construction. The railroad would be built by two companies: the Central Pacific building east, and the Union Pacific building west. Each company would receive \$16,000 for each mile of track laid on flat land and \$48,000 for each mile laid in the mountains. In addition, railroad companies were granted 6400 acres on each side of the track for each mile built. By the time the railroad was finished, the Union Pacific and Central Pacific companies had received 33 million acres of land,³ much of which had been promised to Native Americans.

The railroad altered forever the lives of Native Americans; in addition to the loss of land, tribes witnessed the extinction of the buffalo, a creature that fed the physical and spiritual needs of Native tribes. Multicultural historian Ronald Takaki describes the tactics used by railroad companies in their quest to claim tribal land so that the Iron Horse could steam onward to the Pacific:

The railroad was more than a metaphor: It was, in reality, a corporate interest aggressively involved in the white settlement of the West and the destruction of Indians. Behind this “resistless ‘march to the sea’” were deliberate corporate efforts to usurp Indian lands for railroad construction. . . . [Railroad companies] subsidized newspapers to support their interests and employed lobbyists to influence legislation granting them right-of-way through Indian territory.⁴

Early on, Native Americans were placed “on the other side of the tracks”; they were not to be part of the Unity promised by the railroad.

² David Haward Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Viking, 1999) 94-99.

³ Stephen Ambrose. *Nothing Like It In The World: The Men Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad 1863-1869* (New York: Simon, 2000) 80-81, 95.

⁴ Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) 173-174.

While twentieth-century historians read with horror the atrocities committed against Native Americans during westward expansion, railroad companies, politicians, and many American citizens considered the removal of Native Americans a necessary step in order to better the lives of all Americans. Thus, the Central Pacific and Union Pacific teams began work in 1863; construction was slow for the first two years due to a shortage of labor and supplies, caused mainly by the Civil War. By the time the war had ended in 1865, however, both companies had formed impressive teams, comprised mostly of immigrant labor: Chinese on the CPRR and Irish on the UPRR. Over the next four years, railroad laborers toiled to build a 1,774-mile railroad by hand. Both companies faced daily challenges: the UPRR found itself in frequent confrontation with Native American tribes, particularly since the tracks plowed through the lands promised them by the government; and the CPRR faced the nearly insurmountable obstacle of laying tracks through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, including a 1,659 foot long tunnel that was chiseled at the rate of 8 inches per day.⁵

These obstacles were documented in the newspapers by war correspondents and journalists newly unemployed after the South surrendered. Thus, the energies of these journalists went into telling the story – and capturing the drama – of the construction of the nation's first national railroad. The following article from the *Daily Alta* typifies journalistic accounts of railroad construction; in this case a description of a speedy assembly line reads as a dramatic near collision:

April 28, 1869, Central Pacific Railroad:
[The platform car is] met by another car. This car is bowling along the downward slope pushed by men on each side using their feet like oars. Surely there must be a contretemps, for vehicles cannot pass on a single track.
But wait! The downhill car is stopped in an instant. The men lift it off the track and stand it on edge and the loaded car slips past without delay.⁶

⁵ Winter 4-5.

⁶ *Alta California*, 28 April 1869.

The reporter continues his dramatic recounting of the day's events by relying on theatrical terminology: "But we have only taken in a portion of the scene."

In addition to providing dramatic accounts of the dangerous task of railroad construction, journalists also wrote of intense competition and bickering between the UPRR and the CPRR workers. Various newspaper articles described disputes between the Chinese and Irish workers, including scenarios in which the Irish fired blasts without warning nearby Chinese and the Chinese retaliated by doing the same. Many Irish and Chinese lives were lost in this ongoing feud that lasted several miles between Promontory Summit and Ogden, Utah.⁷ These articles recorded the presence of immigrant labor. Yet they also reflect an atmosphere of "a contest," almost as if newspaper subscribers were in a position to observe from the comfort of their own homes a "cockfight" – the white supervisors and investors proudly tossed their respective animals into the pen to see whose cocks were stronger. In fact, Chinese laborers on the Central Pacific crew were frequently referred to as "Crocker's Pets" after Superintendent Charles Crocker. Railroad companies profited from this divisive competition, allowing it to fuel construction, ensuring that American citizens would soon experience the benefits of the railroad. Ironically, then, the Unity promised by the railroad was accomplished, at least in part, by fostering division among laborers. Thus, while such journalistic coverage of immigrant labor did document the presence of minority laborers, they did so in a way that simultaneously relegated them to second-class status and stripped them of any human claim to their accomplishment.

As newspapers continued to record the action (and bickering) on the tracks, Americans became more and more invested in the railroad project. Having been fully apprised of every dramatic detail of railroad construction, everyday American citizens were as excited and as

⁷ Ambrose 327-238.

involved as the railroad barons and their laborers. Thus, when the UPRR and the CPRR rails were set to meet in May of 1869, citizens across the country were poised to throw a grand celebration.

The drama that took place on Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869 was not a conventional drama staged before a crowd of spectators in a proscenium theatre. Yet, the ceremonies surrounding the completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad can certainly be described as theatrical. For the celebration included "staged" elements that would have made Belasco's mouth water: clearly established characters in a well-defined, complex dramatic "race" against nature and one another; dignitaries; cannons; fireworks; photo-ops; and a golden spike that was never intended to be functional.

The weeks and months leading up to the Promontory celebration provided the nation with a running commentary on "the great race": the Union Pacific (heading West) versus the Central Pacific (heading East). Because the government provided subsidies to the companies based on the number of miles completed, the "great race" actually existed on multiple levels. For the railroad owners and shareholders, the race was a greedy quest for money. For the laborers, the race attempted to show which "team" was the strongest and the fastest. Newspapers from Sacramento to New Orleans to New York asked the question on many minds: "Who will reach Promontory Summit first?" This match-up of players takes on added significance when ethnicity is taken into account; the Union Pacific crew was largely made up of Irish workers, while Chinese laborers manned the Central Pacific crew. A new, unspoken question characterized a different debate in the national discourse: "who is the better laborer – Pat Irishman or John Chinaman?" Significantly, this question was never really answered. While the Central Pacific's Chinese crew was first to arrive at the meeting point at Promontory Summit, this arrival could

hardly be regarded as a true "victory," for both companies had graded tracks far beyond the Promontory Summit, and it was ultimately the U.S. government that determined where the tracks would meet. If anything, then, the race ended with a draw. Because of the government's intervention as well as forced weather delays, neither team could legitimately claim victory.⁸

That, of course, did not keep them from trying. They simply changed the contest. The question was no longer who would lay the most miles, or who would reach the other company's scouting teams first, but rather who could lay the most miles of track in a single day. Due to the relatively flat topography of much of the UP's route, they had been able to lay track at a faster pace than the CP crew that had tunneled slowly through the Sierras. As the companies neared Promontory, however, the geographical advantage switched: the UP was faced with a steep grade and the CP found a flat respite from mountainous terrain. Crocker decided to take advantage of the situation. After suffering months of teasing from the UP's Gen. Dodge (as well as a handful of lost bets), Crocker devised a scheme in which the CP crew could once and for all break the UP's record of 4.5 miles in one day, a feat that had been bragged about in newspapers. When the UP had only 9 very difficult miles left, and the CP had 14 miles left, Crocker set his plan into action. With carefully scripted precision, Chinese graders and Irish tracklayers worked with pre-positioned materials. By the end of the day, the Central Pacific had laid 10 miles of track. It was a remarkable feat. Conveniently, it was a feat that could not be matched by the Union Pacific, seeing as they had only 9 miles left before they reached Promontory. Thus, despite government intervention and a "draw" in the real race, the Central Pacific was able to claim a victory for themselves by laying more track in one day than had ever been laid before.⁹

⁸ Ambrose 318-355.

⁹ Ambrose 322-349.

The record stands to this day. Significantly, though, the victory was not portrayed as a "Chinese" victory but rather as a victory for Crocker and Stanford.

The Central Pacific bigwigs rode this "victory" all the way to Promontory, arriving at the government-designated meeting place on May 7, 1869, a week after their crew had reached the destination. They had anticipated meeting their Union Pacific counterparts, but the UP was held up. As a result, the ceremonies planned for May 8, 1869 were postponed. Thus while the date engraved on the ceremonial golden spike reads May 8, 1869, the actual ceremony occurred two days later.¹⁰ The Central Pacific's on time arrival allowed them to once more claim victory in the race. The script's central question – "Who will get there first?" – had been answered.

The drama of the occasion, however, was just beginning. Stephen Ambrose writes in *Nothing Like It In The World* that the ceremony at Promontory Summit was not planned in advance: "Many of the decisions had to be improvised."¹¹ Ambrose is partially correct; until an hour before the ceremony was scheduled to begin, it was still unclear which dignitary would place the final spike. However, Ambrose overlooks the obvious planning revealed in the very presence of a golden spike and laurel tie, both of which were to be used in the ceremony and then removed for posterity. The ceremony that resulted, then, was an odd combination of spontaneous and calculated choices.

Many of the elements of the ceremony did appear to be last-minute decisions. After a reportedly fierce argument over which company deserved the honor of hammering first, it was decided that Leland Stanford of the Central Pacific would take the first swing at the golden spike. His Union Pacific counterpart, General Grenville Dodge, would follow. Speeches delivered by Dodge and Stanford also seemed to be extemporaneous. A battalion of soldiers,

¹⁰ Bain 651-654.

¹¹ Ambrose 364.

coincidentally in the area, was invited to attend the ceremony, providing an increased atmosphere of officiality.¹²

Other ceremonial elements, however, showed planning. Military bands from Utah were in attendance to play patriotic songs. Reporters and photographers were accommodated in nearly every way.¹³ In fact, the photographers were given the privilege of posing participants for specific shots. They were not limited to candid shots for archival purposes; they were fully involved in "staging" the scene with an eye for photographic composition. Andrew Russell's quintessential photograph from this occasion (see fig. 2.1) emphasizes the "union" of the two



Figure 2.1. Russell's Photograph Taken at Promontory Summit on May 10, 1869 (Union Pacific Museum)

companies, with two steam engines meeting nose to nose. Officials from both companies are seen shaking hands, and workers standing on top of the engines are reaching out toward one another. Dozens of men stand around the engines. Visually, the photograph communicates a

¹² Ambrose 365.

¹³ Bain 658-663.

merging; human bodies fill the left and right side of the image, nearly from top to bottom. From the edges, the position of the men's bodies funnels toward the two central "actions" in this photograph: the handshake between dignitaries, and the bottle sharing between laborers. Thus, in the action captured, the positioning of human bodies, and the grandeur of physical scale, this photograph has for over a century communicated the "union" of two companies and the "unity" of the United States of America. Significantly, though, despite the fact that 90% of the Central Pacific crew was Chinese, not a single Chinese face can be seen in the photograph. Furthermore, even though a number of women and children were in the audience at Promontory Summit, Russell's picture includes only men. Thus this iconic photograph and the celebration it captured foreshadowed the reality of the "unity" so many Chinese labored to make possible: it was a unity for white American men, and it was a unity that would be as fabricated as the photograph.

In addition to giving attention to intentional photography, the planners of the Promontory celebration made a calculated choice that has served as a model for the world's media and was the original "nationwide broadcast." Telegraph operators literally choreographed the scene of the ceremony so that the entire world could participate in the same event. Historian David Haward Bain describes this unprecedented media event:

Two telegraph operators . . . stood by as the Central Pacific's general foreman of telegraph construction, Amos L. Bowsher, expertly wrapped a wire extension from the eastern overhead cable around the handle of [Leland] Stanford's silver maul and connected to a copper plate on the striking face. With the first hammer-tap the connection would be made – and the driving of the last spike would be "heard" all around the country.¹⁴

Bain goes on to describe how cities equipped with fire-alarm telegraphs sounded an alarm at the exact moment of the connection.

¹⁴ Bain 663.

In this way, citizens from across the nation were able to participate in the ceremony that united the nation. It is certainly arguable that, so quickly on the heels of the Civil War, many Americans were anxious to participate in a performance of unity. Apparently, Americans did participate. Citizens in Chicago formed a seven-mile long parade after the last tie was laid. New York City church bells chimed and in Washington 100 cannons were fired. Even former Confederate strongholds such as Charleston and New Orleans participated in the celebration. As the last spike was pounded, Philadelphia's Liberty Bell clanged, singing for the "united" railroad a song of freedom and liberty.¹⁵

Indeed, Americans outside of Promontory Summit actually celebrated more than those in attendance at the official ceremony. For when the telegraph sounded as the hammer hit the spike on Monday, May 10, 1869, citizens across the nation had already been celebrating for days. Having planned elaborate festivities for May 8, many cities decided to continue with their ceremonies as planned despite the delay in Promontory. According to the Sacramento and San Francisco newspapers, citizens celebrated Friday, Saturday, and Sunday with parades, processions, and cannons. Sacramento and San Francisco had planned elaborate celebrations and had carefully instructed their citizens on how to participate. A large ad appeared in the May 8, 1869 edition of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, urging citizens to join the celebration and providing them with their "role" in the party:

Attention Citizens!
Pacific Railroad Celebration.
The undersigned Celebration Committee
Respectfully call upon the citizens of San Francisco TO ILLUMINATE
their houses, offices, and stores on Saturday night. Large bonfires will
burn on all the hill tops, and a constant shower of rockets will be the
fitting termination of a grand celebration.¹⁶

¹⁵ Ambrose 366-367; Bain 667.

¹⁶ Advertisement, *San Francisco Chronicle* 8 May 1869.

As thrilling as fireworks may be, San Francisco residents were treated to an even more theatrical treat. *The Chronicle* describes it thus:

High up above the heads of the vast crowd had been constructed a temporary railroad track, and when people were listening attentively to the speaker the shrill whistle of a locomotive was heard and before any one thought what or where it could be, an engine breathing smoke and fire rushed with lightning speed across from one side of the Pavilion to the other. . . . It was arranged similarly to the exciting railroad scene in *Under the Gaslight*, and in the celebration nothing could be more appropriate, and no incident in the day's proceedings called forth greater applause.¹⁷

The incorporation of a staged Iron Horse, much like that seen in the most popular railroad melodrama of the day, must have been an exciting and surreal moment in the lives of the spectators, many of whom had seen *Under the Gaslight* and its spectacular steam engine. In fact, theatrical advertisements and reviews in *The Daily Dramatic Chronicle* indicate that *Under the Gaslight* ran for twenty-one straight performances in November and December of 1867, playing to sold-out houses.¹⁸ At the moment the staged Iron Horse steamed through San Francisco's citywide commemoration of the railroad's completion, one might imagine that the celebrants were keenly aware of their participation in a grand historical moment. They might have felt like they had stepped into the world of a play, or that the fictional world of possibilities had burst into their everyday reality.

Significantly, the average celebrant in May of 1869 likely remembered the event for the rest of his/her life. Yet his/her memory would not have been without shaping. Spectators at Promontory Summit likely did not recall the large number of Chinese laborers attending the ceremony because the Chinese laborers were not allowed into the "picture frame" of the day's theatre. Those who planned and implemented the celebrations of the transcontinental railroad

¹⁷ "Celebration – The Completion of the Transcontinental Railroad," *San Francisco Chronicle* 9 May 1869: 1:6.

¹⁸ "Amusements, Etc," *Daily Dramatic Chronicle* [San Francisco] 12 Dec 1867: 3:1; See also "Amusements, Etc," *Daily Dramatic Chronicle* [San Francisco] 13 Dec 1867: 3:1.

did so with Herodotus in mind: they would be securing this “glorious” moment in the nation’s memory forever. They also did so with a keen eye for performance. As the newspaper account of the San Francisco celebration suggests, the organizers incorporated images from popular entertainment (i.e. the steam engine barreling across the stage in *Under the Gaslight*) into their celebrations. In this way, the celebrations surrounding railroad construction formalized images of the Iron Horse that had previously existed only on stage. Subsequent playwrights, musicians, and illustrators perpetuated the use of these images, giving them a theatrical afterlife. Several nineteenth-century melodramas feature steam engines running on real tracks. Many more dramas incorporate the use of the telegraph and its proximity to the tracks. In addition, railroad scenes on stage recreate the dramatic entrance of the engines at Promontory Summit: the whistle blows loudly, the engineer boldly waves his arm out the window, and the world seems to stop as the train makes its entrance. Nineteenth-century songs, too, focus on the train's whistle and the grandeur of the rails. Thus railroad celebrations incorporated images of the stage and validated as "history" and "reality" images that would subsequently be used by popular entertainers and by politicians anxious to maintain a stabilized definition of what it means to be "united" and what it means to be "American."

Images of the Railroad in Nineteenth-Century Popular Entertainment

For more than a century, the railroad has been a popular icon in American folk music; what grade-school student has not sung “I’ve Been Workin’ On the Railroad”? Songs about the railroad have survived and flourished into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, despite the consistent decline of railroads in this country. Whether about the locomotive, travelers, or railroad employees, folk music has left its mark on the received history of the American railroad, a history that started with the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in 1828.

American citizens planned a grand celebration in honor of the start of construction on the B&O line; the festivities included several anthems. The lyrics raised on that day praise the ambitious pursuit of linking two cities by rail:

Here's a road to be made
With the pick and spade,
'Tis to reach Ohio, for the benefit of trade;
Here are mountains to be level'd,
Here are valleys to be filled,
Here are rocks to be blown, and bridges too to build.¹⁹

The song speaks to the enthusiasm held by many Americans as they envisioned a future of easier trade and transportation. It also, however, hints at the uncompromising attitude with which railroad companies would pursue their goal – if a mountain blocks the path, it can be blasted to pieces; if a Native people obstructs the progress of the rails, they, too, can be done away with. By emphasizing the railroad's (and the American engineers') ability to “conquer” permanent aspects of the nation's topography, the song participates in the creation of the railroad as a symbol of progress, power, and entitlement.

The enthusiasm displayed at the B&O ceremony continued into the 1830s, a decade that saw the beginning of railroad growth in the United States. Only seven years after the B&O ceremony, more than 200 railway charters had been created; more than 1,000 miles of track connected eleven states. Construction reached its peak in 1872, when more than 7,400 miles of track were laid in a period of 12 months. Construction rates fluctuated after 1872, with some years seeing more new tracks than others. Yet the railroad's influence on American culture did not decline simply because construction slowed. The average American depended on the railways for virtually every aspect of their lives. In addition to transportation and trade, the railroads also offered citizens land; by the turn of the century, the majority of Americans who

¹⁹ qtd. in Norm Cohen, *Long Steel Rail: The Railroad in American Folksong*, 2nd ed (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 2000) 39.

lived west of the Mississippi had mortgages through a railroad company.²⁰ Not surprisingly, as railroad companies gained more control on the local, state, and federal levels, Americans began to watch railroad construction with a more suspicious eye. This shift in attitudes toward the railroad is manifest in American folk music.

Enthusiasm for the railroad continued in American folk music in to the 1830s and 1840s, with songs such as John Gadsby Saxe's "Rhyme of the Rail":

Singing through the forest, rattling over ridges,
Shooting over arches, dashing under bridges,
Whizzing through the mountain, buzzing o'er the vale,
Bless me ain't it pleasant riding on a rail.²¹

The narrator who sings the "Rhyme" invokes the same images posed by the B&O song: mountains, valleys, and bridges. In this song, though, the singer is a passenger; he is living, singing proof that America had succeeded in building a railroad.

Enthusiasm for the railroad began to fade in the late 1840s and into the 1850s, in part because the novelty had worn off; additionally, the public felt uneasy about an increasing number of train wrecks and passenger fatalities. The 1850s and 1860s saw several songs about train wrecks, including "The Song of the Locomotive" in which the locomotive is personified and sings frightening lyrics: "Beware! Beware! For I come in might!" he declares. "I rejoice o'er the slaughter my wheels have wrought, / And I laugh at the mangled slain."²² Public fascination with railroad accidents betrayed more than fear; audiences enjoyed vaudeville acts such as *Le Voyage En Suisse*, an elaborately staged train accident performed across the United States by The Hanlon Brothers, a popular variety duo in the 1860s.²³

²⁰ Cohen 18.

²¹ Cohen 42.

²² Cohen 45.

²³ Mark Cosdon, "Train Smash-Ups Made Comic: The Hanlon Brother's 'Le Voyage en Suisse,'" Association for Theatre in Higher Education Conference, San Francisco, 29 July 2005.

Another song from the 1860s conveys the dangers of riding the rails; it also, however, foreshadows the frontier melodrama that would begin to play on the nation's stages a decade later. In this song, a young lady who is traveling alone is taken in by a young man (with a moustache) who promises to keep her company during the journey. During a moment of panic – in the darkness – the lady leans in for the comfort of the man; his moustache, of course, falls off of his face and becomes stuck on the lady's lips. The other passengers laugh at her as the young man makes his getaway. To make matters worse, she finds that the man has robbed her.²⁴ Thus, when passengers boarded a train, they were exposing themselves to possible train wrecks and to crime.

As construction of the transcontinental railroad picked up speed in the late 1860s, songs began to depict railroad workers. Music dealing with railroad construction continued through the 1880s. Many of these “construction songs” portray Irish railroad workers. According to music historian Norm Cohen, it is difficult to know whether the songs originated on the tracks or in the music halls. Songs like “The Boss of the Section Gang” were written by work crews and later taken to the stage by Irish performers; “Paddy Works on the Railway,” however, was likely developed and popularized by Irish performers.²⁵ Several songs concerning Irish construction crews reveal frustrations among the laborers. “Mick Upon the Railroad,” for example, depicts an Irish laborer who is clearly unhappy with his life:

The Railroad, the Railroad
The divil take the railroad.
When I rises on Monday morn,
I hear the sound of the damned owld horn
I curse the hour that I was born,
To work upon the railroad.²⁶

²⁴ Cohen 52.

²⁵ Cohen 531

²⁶ Cohen 551.

“Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill” offers a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the way in which Irish crews were treated by the railroad companies:

Workin’ all day without sugar in me tay,
Hammerin’ rocks on the old railway,
The months roll by and I don’t get no pay.
Drill, ye tarriers, drill.

The song ends with an anecdote at once funny and frightening in its ability to capture the exploitation of railroad workers:

Last week a premature blast went off,
And a mile in the air went big Jim Goff.
When pay day next it came around,
Poor Jim’s pay a dollar short he found,
“What for?” says he, then came this reply,
“You were docked for the time you were up in the sky.”²⁷

“Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill” found its way to the New York stage, in a play called “A Brass Monkey” and in various vaudeville acts. Perhaps because of its ironic tale and its record of popular success on the vaudeville stage, “Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill” has remained a popular component of folksong anthologies and was recorded by many folk singers, including Chubby Parker.²⁸

African-American railroad laborers likely developed another classic folksong that survives in modern recordings: “Nine Pound Hammer” dates to 1870 and is characteristic of a work song, with each solo line repeated by the group.

Well this old hammer (Well this old hammer)
Just a little too heavy (Just a little too heavy)
For my size (For my size)
Baby, for my size (Baby, for my size)
Well, this old hammer (Well, this old hammer)

²⁷ Cohen 554.

²⁸ Cohen 556.

Shine like silver (Shine like silver)
Ring like gold (Ring like gold)
Baby, ring like gold (Baby, ring like gold).²⁹

The song's rhythmic lyrics kept spike-drivers in time and blended one hour into the next.

Another work song associated with African-American laborers is the famous "Ballad of John Henry," which will be discussed in the next chapter.

The most popular "construction song" of all, of course, is that classic song beloved by millions of grade-school students: "I've Been Workin' On the Railroad." Ironically, of all the folk songs dealing with railroad construction, this song is the hardest to trace. It is entirely possible that the song was not originally written or sung by railroad workers at all.³⁰

A few songs, particularly after the 1870s, addressed the corruption many Americans began to associate with the railroad. "Subsidy: A Goat Island Ballad" is a fine example of music that questions the honesty of big railroad companies. The song describes San Francisco's attempt to bribe the railroad company to make that city the terminus of the line:

The Railroad took the handsome gift, but said 'twould wait a while
Before it filled the marsh-land in or drove a single pile,
And then it went to Oakland, and with clever word and smile,
Agreed to make the terminus at that place if the city would donate
All its waterfront and never expect the cars to stop within a mile,
For this Railroad Corporation is the deuce on subsidies.³¹

The frustration revealed in "Subsidy" led to what Norm Cohen has characterized as a peak in public hostility toward the railroads. Cohen suggests that negative views of the railroad reflected the public's distaste for corruption. While this is certainly a significant contributing factor, I would argue that the increase in negative railroad sentiments (with a coinciding decrease in aggrandized railroad images) may also be evidence of a nation in economic crisis, a nation with

²⁹ Cohen 571.

³⁰ Cohen 535.

³¹ Qtd in Richard E Lingenfelter, *Songs of the American West* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1968) 70.

thousands of Chinese moving from completed railroad jobs to compete with white Americans for a limited number of jobs. Since the public perceived that the railroad company portrayed in “Subsidy” was responsible for the “importation” of said Chinese labor, the railroad may have been a controversial image to invoke in song or on stage.

Prior to the economic crisis of the 1870s, however, the railroad served as a positive symbol in American popular entertainment. Such images were not limited to songs; the grand “railroad play” began around the same time as the “railroad folk song”: with the opening day of construction on the Baltimore and Ohio line.

A fitting playwright provided the script for this first American “railroad play.” Given that his stepfather was George Washington, George Washington Parke Custis seemed ideally suited to the study of history. Indeed his best-known plays, *The Indian Prophecy* (1827) and *Pocahontas* (1830), both involved the telling of history. Yet, as historian Murray H. Nelligan notes, “[i]nterest in the past did not blind Custis to contemporary developments.”³² In 1828, Custis wrote *The Rail Road* in honor of the start of construction on the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad; it was the first American play to feature a railroad in the scenery. As such, Custis's play simultaneously celebrated an up-and-coming technological movement and established for future playwrights the characteristics of “the railroad play.” Unfortunately, there is no known copy of the play; the Library of Congress has no entry for *The Rail Road*, and to the best of my knowledge no copies of the play exist in any library in the United States. What little we know about the play comes from newspaper reports of the production.

The Rail Road was an immediate success; following the premiere at the Baltimore Theatre, the company canceled the next evening's bill so as to mount *The Rail Road* again.³³ The

³² Murray H. Nelligan, *Old Arlington: The Story of Arlington House* (Virginia: Chatelaine, 2001) 169.

³³ Nelligan 169.

most popular scene in the play occurred in the finale, when the audience could see "a distant view of the *Rail Road* in full operation."³⁴ The play was really an operetta, filled with songs glorifying the United States and the railroad. While there does not seem to be an extant copy of the script, a number of the play's song lyrics were published in newspapers of the day. These snippets from the play do provide an insight into the flavor of the piece. As catalogued by Nelligan, the play's heroes were two Irishmen: Mike M'Ilhany (played by Joseph Jefferson, Jr., father of the famed "Rip Van Winkle") and Thady O'Brien (played by Lewis Heyl). That the railroad was portrayed as a source of national pride is evidenced in the multiple-verse rendition of "Yankee Doodle Dandy" with new lyrics:

Yankee Doodle, roll along
The road's not rough or sandy;
On iron rail we bowl along,
And sing Yankee doodle dandy.³⁵

After linking the railroad to the quintessential "American" character in drama (the Stage Yankee), Custis goes on to praise the near-perfection of the railroad:

Of each wonderful plan
E're invented by man,
That which nearest perfection approaches
Is a road made of iron,
Which horses ne'er tire on;
And travelled by steam, in steam coaches.³⁶

Given that Custis had previously linked the railroad with American patriotism, it follows that such a tribute to the railroad is also, at least on some level, a tribute to Custis's beloved United States of America.

Clearly, *The Rail Road* was a huge success on the Baltimore stage when it debuted in 1828. It also met with approval in Philadelphia, where it was staged in 1830. Having succeeded

³⁴ Nelligan 174.

³⁵ Nelligan 170.

³⁶ Nelligan 170.

on the Philadelphia stage, the company took the show on the road, performing in Washington and Alexandria, under the title *The Rail Road and the Canal*, to attract an audience that was highly interested in the construction of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, then underway. A Washington newspaper declared that the play was "rapturously received." It is highly likely that the play performed in Philadelphia, Washington, and Alexandria was slightly modified from the original script, for there is evidence that Custis added a comic character in an 1830 revision. The character, Fidgett, was a nervous traveler. Again, no script is known to exist, so one can only imagine how Fidgett figured into the story. However, it is plausible that Fidgett was seen in the last scene of the play involving Custis's other main revision to the original script: a real train. Whereas in the 1828 performance, the audience was greeted with a "distant view of the Rail Road in full operation," spectators in Philadelphia, Washington, and Alexandria were offered a real treat at the climax of the play when a real locomotive appeared on the stage. It was the first time a genuine steam engine was used on the American stage, and the celebratory mood carried throughout the theatre as the train's whistle tooted in time with a march that had been composed specifically for the play. The play was also apparently staged in Columbia, South Carolina. In January 1831, Custis wrote in a letter that the play was about to receive its twentieth performance in Columbia.³⁷ Thus the "railroad scene" was born. Audiences along the eastern seaboard had been exposed to the sensationalism of an on-stage train; and theatre practitioners had witnessed the commercial appeal of the Iron Horse.

As the railroad became a daily part of life in the eastern United States, theatre companies offered a number of "railroad farces," short sketches that were frequently presented as afterpieces. The most popular of these short plays seems to have been "The Railroad Station," which premiered at the New National Theatre on November 25, 1840. It was revived at least

³⁷ Nelligan 182-183.

eight times between 1841 and 1857, playing at the Chatham, the Olympic, the Park, and Barnum's American Museum, among lesser-known venues.³⁸ Two other plays, "The Railroad Depot" and "A Trip By Railroad," were also presented in the 1840s. Burlesque "railroad plays" appeared in the late 50s and early 60s, including a minstrel scene entitled, "The Railroad Explosion," which was performed in Philadelphia by the Carncross and Dixey's Troupe.³⁹

Stage representations of the railroad were not limited to the eastern United States, however. In fact, one of the leading proponents of the anti-Chinese movement, Henry George, became obsessed with the railroad and its reliance on cheap labor after watching a play performed at the American Theatre in San Francisco on a New Year's evening several years prior to the formation of the Central Pacific Railroad Company. George spoke of this experience nearly thirty years later during an 1890 speech in San Francisco:

I remember . . . sitting one New Year's night in the gallery of the old American theatre . . . when a new drop curtain fell, and we all sprang to our feet, for on that curtain was painted what was then a dream of the far future – the overland train coming into San Francisco.⁴⁰

While George apparently did not mention the title of the play in his 1890 speech, an earlier letter to his father indicates that he was at the American Theatre on New Year's evening in 1860 to watch a production of *Richard III*.⁴¹ Assuming the curtain was used at the conclusion of *Richard III*, the railroad imagery was most likely not part of the action of the play but was simply an adornment for the theatre. A program from 1863 indicates that a San Francisco theatre company produced an act called "The Railroad – True Imitation." Regardless of whether the representation was in the text of a play or merely decoration for a theatre house, it seems clear

³⁸ George C.D. Odell, *Annals of the New York Stage*, vols. 1-15. (New York: Columbia UP, 1928). See Vol. 4 (p. 462, 465-66, 570); Vol. 5 (44, 317); and Vol. 6 (73, 603).

³⁹ "The Railroad Explosion: An Act in Two Scenes" (New York: S. French, c. 1863-1869).

⁴⁰ Henry George, Jr., *Henry George* (New York: Chelsea House, 1981) 99-100.

⁴¹ George 99.

that representations of the railroad indeed occurred on stages west of the Mississippi at a time prior to the laying of the first transcontinental tracks.

Half way through the construction of the nation's first transcontinental railroad, Augustin Daly's *Under the Gaslight* provided the most famous railroad scene of the nineteenth century, a scene that has been adapted and repeated on stage and screen through the present day.

Premiering on August 12, 1867, *Under the Gaslight* thrilled audiences with the spectacular conclusion to Act Four, scene three. In this scene, an innocent man is tied to railroad tracks, the heroine is locked in a shed, and the train is apparently barreling straight ahead. The heroine breaks free, of course, in time to free the man from the tracks just as the massive headlight of an Iron Horse dazzles the audience. Bruce McConachie describes how this scene might have been staged:

Certainly, the house had to be nearly dark for the climax of *Under the Gaslight*, since Daly's locomotive effect depended on the engine's headlight partly blinding the audience so that they wouldn't see the two stagehands pushing the contraption across the stage.⁴²

According to *The New York Times* of August 13, 1867, there was "hearty applause" following the scene.⁴³ *The New York Herald Tribune*, on the other hand, offered a cynical review: "As a vehicle for the production of theatrical effects, it has a distinct utility; but as a work of dramatic art it has no permanent value."⁴⁴ The review goes on to state that the "railroad scene" was the most effective of the show and certainly offered a "strong appeal to the lovers of the sensation element." The play returned to the New York stage in 1873, apparently not for the first time. *The New York Times* review of the April 12, 1873 performance of the play at the Grand Opera

⁴² Bruce McConachie, *Melodramatic Formations: American Theatre & Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1992) 245.

⁴³ Rev. of *Under the Gaslight* by Augustin Daly, *New York Times* 13 Aug. 1867: 5:3.

⁴⁴ Rev. of *Under the Gaslight* by Augustin Daly, *New York Herald Tribune* 14 Aug. 1867: 4:5.

House mentions that the play had previously had "several prolonged runs."⁴⁵ The reviewer observes that "[*Under the Gaslight*] was proved, yesterday, to have as much power to interest, to touch, and to amuse as in its earlier youth." Six months later *Under the Gaslight* was staged at the Broadway Theatre. The *Times* review of the production reflected the widespread reputation of the play: "the terrific sensation of the railroad scene, of course, provoked the usual encore."⁴⁶ So significant was this railroad scene that it frequently appeared on the play's advertising poster (see fig. 2.2).

Under the Gaslight owed its success to the railroad in more than one way. In addition to the spectacular onstage train that consistently brought audiences to the theatre, the railroad also helped transport touring companies and stars to various locations across the nation where *Under the Gaslight* and other plays received warm welcome at local theatres and opera houses. *Under the Gaslight* encountered eager crowds across the nation. Newspapers indicate that the play was

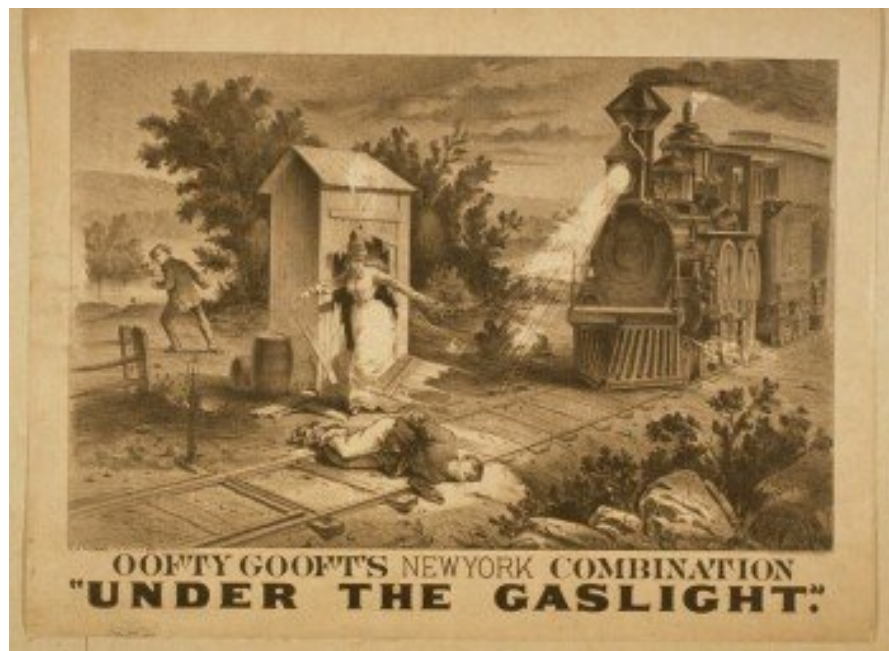


Figure 2.2. Poster From *Under the Gaslight*

⁴⁵ *New York Times* 13 Apr. 1873, 4:6.

performed throughout the western United States as well as along the eastern seaboard. Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, Nevada, staged the play for five straight performances in September of 1868.⁴⁷ *Under the Gaslight* also appeared in the Metropolitan Theater in San Francisco from November 23, 1867 to December 22, 1867. The production met with such success, in fact, that the *Daily Dramatic Chronicle* warned San Franciscans to act quickly if they wished to see the play: "Seats should be secured several days beforehand by those who desire to enjoy this astonishing performance."⁴⁸ The newspaper also indicated that many citizens went to see the production more than once, a few even making a nightly appearance at the theatre. That the production was an enormous hit in San Francisco is further evidenced by the creation of a "burlesque" of *Under the Gaslight* at the rival New Alhambra Theater. This burlesque, entitled *Under the Lamp Post*, played for several weeks. Because it took a few months to get the burlesque up running, theatre companies throughout San Francisco suffered small audiences during *Gaslight's* run. Halfway through the run, however, an act of sabotage may have occurred; Charles Wheatleigh, the star of the production, made an announcement in the December 9th edition of the *Daily Dramatic Chronicle* that he was offering a reward for information leading to the capture of the "scoundrel" who damaged the locomotive for the previous night's performance. Because of its extended run, the creation of a burlesque, and the evidence of jealous sabotage, it can be concluded that *Under the Gaslight* was immensely popular in San Francisco in 1867, during the middle of construction on the Central Pacific line. This famous melodrama featuring a sensational "railroad scene" was, indeed, staged at locations along the route of the transcontinental railroad during the time of construction. It is entirely possible, then, that railroad laborers themselves may have witnessed the onstage locomotive while taking in a

⁴⁶ *The New York Times* 4 Nov. 1873, 5:2.

⁴⁷ "Amusements," *The Daily Tresspass* (Virginia City, NV) 4-8 Sep. 1868.

⁴⁸ "Amusements, Etc.," *Daily Dramatic Chronicle* (San Francisco). 13 Dec 1867, 3:1.

play at the end of a grueling day of grading and laying tracks. Significantly, though, *Under the Gaslight* was set in New York; in viewing this famous play, frontier audiences observed an image of a New York railroad – an urban network of rails. It would be nearly two decades before the people of the United States were offered an image of the western railroad on the American stage.

In *Under the Gaslight*, Daly picked up the tradition of "the railroad scene" where Custis left off. However, whereas Custis's incorporation of the on-stage locomotive was designed primarily to honor the technological accomplishment of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, Daly's use of the Iron Horse was highly sensational. Custis's scene had been about the railroad; Daly's scene was really about the heroine, the villain, and the messenger – the train just happened to be the spectacular device that forwarded the plot.

The most significant feat of Daly's "railroad scene," however, has nothing to do with the audiences that viewed it or the reviews it received. Rather the legacy of Daly's famous scene rests in a twenty-seven-year-long legal dispute involving two of the most prominent playwrights of the late nineteenth century.

Dion Boucicault premiered his play, *After Dark*, in 1868, a year after Daly's *Under the Gaslight* and more than a decade after Boucicault himself had fought for tougher copyright laws. Even so, *After Dark* contained a scene that looked suspiciously similar to the "railroad scene" presented in Daly's *Under the Gaslight*. In *After Dark*, the railroad was an underground railroad, and the rescuer was a man, not a woman. Yet many of the techniques used by Daly (sound effects, lights, and an "engine" to signify the train) were also utilized in Boucicault's production.⁴⁹ Daly was not pleased. He immediately filed a lawsuit against the managers of Niblo's Garden and the Old Bowery Theatre, both of which were staging "the railroad scene" in

⁴⁹ *The New York Times* 18 Dec. 1868, 2:2.

question. Daly alleged that Boucicault had "plagiarized" his scene. The lawyers representing the theatre managers and Boucicault held that a copyright applied only to the *words* spoken onstage by characters, not to a visual image or the use of staging techniques. *The New York Times* of December 18, 1868, offers a lengthy decision by Circuit Court Judge Blatchford. The judge placed an injunction on *After Dark*, finding that Boucicault's scene was indeed a copy of Daly's. He ordered the scene to be removed from any performance of *After Dark*.

Boucicault took his play out west, where he devised a plan to rid himself of any future legal problems regarding *After Dark*. In his memoir, *Showman*, William A. Brady spends several pages describing his unwitting involvement in the Boucicault/Daly dispute. Brady had purchased a copy of *After Dark* and presented it on a San Francisco stage, along with several other "pirated manuscripts." After a performance of *After Dark*, however, Brady was approached by Boucicault, who just happened to be in the audience. Brady describes his conversation with Boucicault in great detail; Boucicault accused Brady of stealing his play and threatened to have him arrested. After several similar threats, Boucicault apparently offered Brady a "solution" to the problem: "'How'd ye like to buy me play?' he asked. 'Can ye raise \$1500?'"⁵⁰ The two men negotiated a deal in which Brady would buy *After Dark* from Boucicault for \$1100. At the time, Brady had no idea about the controversy brewing in New York City. "I found myself taking *After Dark* into New York – and we had no sooner opened there than minions of the law slapped an injunction on me -- none other than Augustin Daly was enjoining me from presenting *After Dark* and the courts were back of him."⁵¹ Brady goes on to describe how he got the last laugh on Boucicault: several years later, Christopher Morley staged a parody of *After Dark* in Hoboken. They later took the parody on the road and experienced

⁵⁰ William A. Brady, *Showman* (New York: Dutton, 1937) 68-69.

⁵¹ Brady 70.

great success. Brady received royalty payments for each performance of the parody. Brady gloats in his memoir: "I do wish Dion Boucicault could have seen the figures on the checks that came in forty years after he had looked me over hesitatingly and inquired if I thought I could raise \$1500."⁵²

Certainly, Boucicault's manipulative sale of *After Dark* indicates that Boucicault was stepping away from the fight with Daly. Apparently, though, Daly hadn't quite won the battle. For the next twenty-seven years, Daly would fight in court for a sum of \$37,000, money he claimed was due him from the performances of *After Dark* that were presented prior to Judge Blatchford's injunction as well as those that were given against the judge's orders. The headline from the June 26, 1895 *New York Times* summed up the "final" verdict: "A Long Litigation Probably Ended" (emphasis mine).⁵³ It did not end as Daly would have hoped. The courts refused to assign punitive damages to the managers named in the suit.

Thus, two of the most famous stage depictions of the railroad took place in a firestorm of controversy before the transcontinental railroad was even complete. Performances of *Under the Gaslight* and *After Dark* continued into the next decade, even after Boucicault rid himself of the play.

After *Under the Gaslight* and *After Dark*, few playwrights seemed to use the railroad as spectacle in their works. George Odell's *Annals of the New York Stage* indicates that Charles Foster's *Neck and Neck; or, The Hangman's Noose* was performed at the Bowery in November of 1870. A later description of the play appeared in an art journal: "[It] included a thrilling railway adventure with, no doubt, real cars, locomotives and the rest."⁵⁴ Few details are available concerning *Neck and Neck*; there is no known extant copy of the script. It is not

⁵² Brady 72.

⁵³ "A Long Litigation Probably Ended," *The New York Times* 26 Jun 1895: 14:3.

⁵⁴ Charles Carroll, "A Dramatic Octave," *The Aldine, A Typographic Art Journal* Feb 1871.

possible, therefore, to determine the extent and context of the railroad scene. In addition, it is unclear whether the play's railroad would have been an urban line (like that in *Under the Gaslight*) or a western line.

After *Neck and Neck*'s limited run in late 1870, railroad scenes were rare; if the railroad appeared at all, it appeared on the periphery of western melodramas, or in vaudeville acts such as those offered by The Hanlon Brothers. Daly's *Horizon* (1871) and James McCloskey's *Across the Continent* (1870) both refer to "train stations." Indeed McCloskey's play even has a scene located in the train station.⁵⁵ The use of an Iron Horse for spectacular effect, however, doesn't seem to have occurred. Rather, in plays written between 1871 and 1886, spectacular railroad sequences seem to have been replaced with spoken references to the railroad or limited visual representation of train stations. These plays were more concerned about the characters who traveled the rails than they were about the technology of the railroad.

Nearly two decades after the New York premiere of *Under the Gaslight*, a new "railroad scene" was offered to American audiences in *The Main Line, or Rawson's Y* (1886), written by Henry C. DeMille and Charles Barnard. The action of the play takes place in and around a train station in Colorado in the years between 1883 and 1885. The playwrights capture the scene in the opening stage directions: there is a single track running across the stage and branching into two tracks towards the right side of the stage. A visible telegraph pole and a building with a wooden platform convey that this place is a train station. The playwrights indicate that railroad "paraphernalia" should be scattered about and that railroad ties should be used for seats. This scene does not change for the duration of the play, except to indicate a different time of day. The characters in the play are of two types: those who live at and/or work at the Rawson's train

⁵⁵ James J. McCloskey, *Across the Continent, Dramas From the American Theatre*, ed. Richard Moody (Cleveland: World, 1966) 66-114.

station; and those who stop at Rawson's on their way to other destinations. Thus, in *The Main Line*, the railroad is the thing that brings the characters together.

The story of *The Main Line* is typical of frontier melodrama: the heroine is in love with the hero, but she is being blackmailed by the villain who holds a terrible secret concerning the heroine's father and who will tell the secret unless the heroine agrees to marry him. The hero, of course, is entangled in his own love triangles. As is typical, the action is resolved in a sensational moment of excitement and danger. In this case, the heroine, Possy, is manning the railroad switch when a runaway car separates from the train upon which her lover and the villain are traveling. She believes that her lover is trapped in the loose car as it barrels back toward the station. An offstage whistle is heard from the opposite direction, and in a moment of panic, Possy realizes that the runaway car will slam into another train and derail it. "Oh, my love, my love!" she says, "I must take your life to save the train!"⁵⁶ With a heavy heart, she pulls the switch and sends the runaway car down the secondary track to certain disaster. A loud crash is heard, and Possy faints with the knowledge that she's just killed the love of her life. She was wrong, of course. Her love had loaned the villain his coat, and it was actually the villain who lost his life in the runaway car. Possy and her love find themselves together again, and the two happily look forward to married life on the frontier.

A few other railroad plays appear to have been staged during in the 1890s, including *The Fast Mail*, by Lincoln J. Carter and *The Limited Mail* by Elmer E. Vance. The latter included "a railway train of twelve coaches dashing madly through the darkness, to the accompaniment of the usual whistling, steam, and din" and made a fortune for the author.⁵⁷ As is the case with *Neck and Neck*, a discussion of these two plays is complicated by the lack of extant scripts.

⁵⁶ Henry C. DeMille and Charles Barnard, *The Main Line* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1941) 42.

⁵⁷ Claxton Wilsatch, "Stage-Thrills Up To Date," *Godey's Magazine* July 1896.

The Great Train Robbery (1896), by Scott Marble, is most famous for the silent film it inspired, bearing the same title. The play takes place in Kansas City and in Red Rock, Arizona, and involves a love triangle, gunfire, a train robbery, and "Injuns." In short, it offered audiences virtually every "requirement" for a frontier melodrama. The robbery indicated by the title occurs during the third of four acts. Stage directions regarding the dramatic railroad scene are nearly illegible, but the few bits that can be read suggest that the train was "indicated" by sound effects. The only visible representation of the train was a train car that was partially on stage and partially backstage. Again, due to the poor quality of the manuscript, it is unclear whether the car moved along some kind of track or whether it was stationary and was intended to represent that the train had been effectively "stopped" by the masterminds of the robbery.

Unlike previous plays such as *Under the Gaslight*, however, *The Great Train Robbery* did not offer the "railroad scene" as the most dramatic of the play. Marble's play contains several gunfights as well as a scene in which a bear wanders into camp and a man wrestles him to protect the other characters. Thus, while audiences of early railroad plays might have waited in anticipation for the thrilling, sensational railroad scene, it is likely that audiences of *The Great Train Robbery* were treated to non-stop adventure. Some audience members might have left the theatre talking about the railroad, but an equal number could just have likely been chattering about the bear. Thus, despite the inclusion of the railroad in the title of the play, *The Great Train Robbery* appears to have been less of a "railroad play" than its predecessors.

Nearly ten years following *The Great Train Robbery*, Ramsay Morris's *The Ninety and Nine* thrilled audiences with special effects at its 1902 debut. *The New York Times* describes the railroad scene in Morris's play:

Quick music, lights down, then a sudden flare and the stage at the Academy reveals a giant engine, wheels revolving, autumnal landscape swiftly moving . . .

And when the engine, with its cars, apparently arrives at the endangered village, the three thousand (there were somewhat less) anxious villagers . . . forget all about the danger, fall on their knees, and sing the Doxology. But a little incongruity like that couldn't deter the Fourteenth Street audience last night, which at this point was apparently transported to the very pinnacle of melodramatic transports.⁵⁸

The review goes on to predict that "[t]he success or failure of the play will probably rest on the big locomotive." Apparently, the play met the latter fate; while other "railroad plays" saw revivals in New York, *The Ninety and the Nine* appears to have played the New York stage only once.

Morris's *The Ninety and Nine* may well have been the last of a dying breed of "railroad plays." Following the success of the silent film version of *The Great Train Robbery*, many other silent films utilized railroad scenes. The era of film had arrived, and train imagery on stage seems to have decreased.

Isolating the Railroad From The Laborers Who Built It

The Rail Road, *Under the Gaslight*, and *After Dark* appear to have been the most impressive, highly memorable, and instantly recognizable "railroad scenes" of the nineteenth century. Without exception, they were initially staged prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad. Stage images of the railroad after 1871 were less frequent, or at least less of a "phenomenon." Given the obvious pride that Americans felt following the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, it would make sense for dramatists to re-enact these images of pride on the American stage, just as they had previously re-enacted *The Battle of Bunker Hill* (1797) and *The Glory of Columbia* (1803). Re-enactments of railroad glory, however, did not find their way to the stage. Given the precedent of staging elaborate plays about significant

⁵⁸ "'The Ninety and Nine' – Ramsay Morris's New Melodrama Produced at the Academy of Music," *The New York Times* 8 Oct. 1902, 9:1.

historical events, it seems odd that railroad images faded away at the moment of the railroad's greatest achievement: the completion of the first transcontinental railroad.

Why would railroad imagery all but disappear during the height of the post-Promontory railroad boom, when thousands of laborers were laying tracks throughout the Northwest, the Southwest, and the Rocky Mountain regions? In the eastern United States, it is possible that the legal dispute between Augustin Daly and Dion Boucicault may have prompted second thoughts on the part of would-be producers; Judge Blatchford's verdict virtually gave sole ownership of the "railroad scene" to Daly. The word was out: "Private Property. No Trespassing." Yet, as evidenced by William Brady's ignorance of this on-going litigation prior to his purchase of Boucicault's *After Dark*, it cannot be assumed that theatre practitioners in the western states knew of Daly's copyright or cared to respect it.

So why was the railroad not incorporated more frequently in stage dramas performed or set in the western United States? Significantly, the absence of railroad imagery corresponds with the onset of a severe economic crisis in the early 1870s, a depression fueled by thousands of Chinese laborers who, having completed work on the Central Pacific, were congregating in urban areas and competing with white Americans for jobs. My contention is that many dramatists reflected a popular political position and, as a result, created cultural images that served to further a political cause: passage and enforcement of The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. In a time of such open anti-Chinese rhetoric, it would have been counterproductive to put on stage images of the railroad that was built by Chinese laborers. Thus playwrights, theatre managers, and performers of the western states avoided any glorification of the railroad in an attempt to focus the audiences' attention on "The Chinese Problem" rather than on "The Chinese Accomplishment."

After the Exclusion Act had been passed and the economic crisis had eased, playwrights began to reintroduce railroad imagery to the stage in the late 1880s (i.e., *The Main Line*). Yet these plays continued to separate the technical achievement of the railroad from the men who labored to build it. *The Great Train Robbery*, *The Main Line*, and lesser-known railroad plays such as *The Fast Mail* and *The Limited Mail* contain no Chinese characters. The ideology filtering through dozens of popular songs and plays of the nineteenth century, then, was based in a specific political movement that rose to prominence in the 1870s.

The Anti-Chinese Movement in America

In many ways, Chinese laborers in post-Civil War America – particularly in the western states – were viewed with more suspicion and fear than were African-Americans, Native Americans, or immigrants from Europe. Takaki comments on the intense hatred of Chinese laborers in the late nineteenth century:

In the imagination of anti-Chinese exclusionists, . . . the "race" from the Far East posed a greater threat to white America than did blacks and Indians. Intelligent and competitive, Chinese men could easily eliminate the need for white labor and force white workers into poverty and idleness. Moreover, since they were coming only to make money and return to China, they could drain America of her wealth and energies.⁵⁹

Chinese in America walked a precarious line. Their labor was needed (as is evidenced by their accomplishments on the transcontinental railroad) and their skills were strong; but their speed and efficiency – coupled with the readiness of employers to capitalize on lower wages – resulted in an outbreak of panic among those who feared their working-class status was in jeopardy.

In *The Chinese In America: A Narrative History*, historian Iris Chang describes the bitter cycle of use and abuse that so many Chinese encountered upon their arrival in the United States.

⁵⁹ Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990) 221.

She characterizes the Chinese as "a people both needed and deeply feared" and observes that Chinese laborers were exploited by both the U.S. government and industry while they were simultaneously denied acceptance as fellow Americans.⁶⁰

The Chinese were indeed exploited for their labor and their willingness to accept lower wages than their white counterparts. Chinese labor was crucial in the accomplishment of the railroad, the clearing of thousands of acres of swamp land, and the agricultural development of California; yet Chinese laborers were not favorably received, particularly by those who felt Chinese laborers took jobs that belonged to "Americans" (i.e., "whites"). Thus, as the second half of the nineteenth century saw the country facing economic challenges, vocal disapproval of the Chinese increased and found its way into local, state, and federal legislation. The anti-Chinese movement, which started as early as 1852 and reached its height in the 1870s and 1880s, was directly responsible for the discriminatory legislation that prohibited Chinese laborers from entering the United States until after WWII.

The call for anti-Chinese legislation started in California, both on the state and local levels. In 1852, the legislature passed the Foreign Miner's Tax, which required "foreigners" to pay \$3 per month for a licensing fee. This tax was beneficial to the state on two levels: first, it discouraged foreigners from mining the best claims and relegated them to cleaning abandoned claims; second, it amassed an incredible sum of tax income due to the large number of foreigners in California. According to Chang, by 1853, "more than half of the San Francisco population was foreign-born."⁶¹ Primarily, though, the tax was applied to Chinese and Chicano miners. Significantly, it does not appear that Irish immigrants were required to pay the foreign miner's

⁶⁰ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Penguin, 2003) xi.

⁶¹ Chang 37, 43.

tax, further suggesting that in the western United States, “foreign” was synonymous with “non-white.”⁶²

The next year, Chinese residents of California suffered another blow in the case of *People v. Hall*, which established that a Chinese person could not testify against a white person in court. Two years later, Governor Jon Bigler approved a bill captioned "An Act to Discourage Immigration to this State of Persons Who Cannot Become Citizens Thereof."⁶³ And in 1860, the state passed an "Act for the Protection of Fisheries" which required Chinese to have a license to fish in the state's waters. Any Chinese person caught fishing without a license could have his property seized and sold upon one hour's notice.⁶⁴

Around this time, local labor groups in San Francisco began to organize themselves into political forces. In 1859, the People's Protective Union was organized to defend "free labor" from the Chinese. This organization would expand in 1873 to incorporate such groups around the state; the newly combined groups were called the People's Protective Alliance.⁶⁵

One year after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, 10,000 newly jobless railroad workers fueled a growing unemployment problem; not coincidentally, anti-Chinese activity increased during this time. The majority of these workers were Chinese, and the majority of them congregated in California. The 1870 Census showed that 99.4% of Chinese lived in western states and territories. California was home to 78% of all Chinese in America.⁶⁶ Given the high rate of unemployment and the large number of Chinese laborers willing to work

⁶² Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, 1993) 178, 195; McClain 12-17.

⁶³ Chang 43-44; Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle Against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994) 17.

⁶⁴ William J. Courtney, *San Francisco's Anti-Chinese Ordinances, 1850-1900* (San Francisco: R&E Research, 1974) 8.

⁶⁵ Courtney 23-24.

⁶⁶ Chang 93.

for low wages, white Californians – particularly Irish-Americans – began to fight in earnest for the removal of Chinese competition.

Due to the large Chinese population in San Francisco, the early grass-roots anti-Chinese movement was centered in that city. Several city ordinances were passed in 1870 that obviously targeted Chinese residents. First, the Cubic Air Law required at least 500 cubic feet of open space for each occupant. This ordinance was enforced primarily in Chinese neighborhoods, which were known to house many more laborers per building than was typically found in white neighborhoods. Additionally, the "Sidewalk Ordinance" of 1870 made it illegal for anyone to carry a pole with baskets across one's shoulders (the traditional method of load-carrying among Chinese laborers).⁶⁷ An 1873 San Francisco ordinance was also blatantly aimed at hurting the Chinese population; the 1873 Laundry Ordinance imposed a series of taxes on the city's laundry-houses. Those laundries that used a horse-drawn vehicle were charged \$2 per quarter; those using two horse-drawn vehicles were charged \$4. Those laundries using *no* vehicles were charged \$15 per quarter. Significantly, Chinese laundries rarely used vehicles.⁶⁸

By 1876, enough anti-Chinese grumblings made it to the nation's capital to prompt a federal inquiry into Chinese immigration. A similar statewide investigation was launched in California in the same year.⁶⁹ Also in 1876, San Francisco's city leaders passed another ordinance aimed at making life difficult for its Chinese residents. In an amendment to Section 27, Chapter III, Order 697 of the San Francisco City Code, any use of a gong in a theatre was forbidden. This ordinance was cited by a number of Chinese leaders as having had a negative impact on the Chinese community, as it limited their ability to attend and produce theatre in the

⁶⁷ Chang 119-120.

⁶⁸ McClain 48.

⁶⁹ McClain 63.

city.⁷⁰ Chinese theatres in San Francisco provided a cultural reminder of home to Chinese laborers; they offered a sense of community, and – as will be discussed in Chapter 3 – an opportunity for self-expression. By legislating against the Chinese theatres, the city of San Francisco attempted to deny the Chinese community the right to gather and to witness positive images of China and the Chinese.

The anti-Chinese movement entered its most heated phase under the leadership of an Irish immigrant who began "rallying the troops" in 1877. Denis Kearney, speaking from vacant lots near City Hall, developed a following; in October, Kearney was influential in the formation of the Workingmen's Party of California, a group whose primary purpose was the expulsion of Chinese labor. Kearney was named president of the party. In addition to coining the most recognizable slogan of the anti-Chinese movement ("The Chinese Must Go"), Kearney and his fellow rhetoricians effectively conveyed the gravity of what they alternately called "The Chinese Problem," "The Yellow Peril," and "The Mongolian Invasion." The sentiments held by the Kearneys of San Francisco were not limited to the fringes of political life. In fact, the City Council approved the use of public funds for the purpose of spreading anti-Chinese rhetoric. City records indicate that Mark L. McDonald, an anti-Chinese activist, approached the city for funding and received immediate action:

Resolved, that an expenditure not to exceed fifteen hundred (\$1500) dollars, be and the same is hereby authorized to be made out of the General Fund in payment to Mark L. McDonald, Chairman of the Citizen's Anti-Chinese Committee, to be used in the preparation of a monster anti-coolie petition and to defray other expenses of the Committee.⁷¹

The campaigns of McDonald and Kearney were effective; the Workingmen's Party of California elected enough representatives to the state legislature to ensure significant changes in the 1879

⁷⁰ Courtney 54.

⁷¹ Courtney 64.

revision of the state's Constitution. Under the influence of anti-Chinese politicians, several changes and additions were made to the California Constitution that were specifically aimed at the eventual removal of all Chinese from California. The majority of these statutes were included in Article XIX: Sections 4 and 5 forbade further Chinese immigration into California; Section 6 denied the Chinese the right to sue or to fish in the state's waters; Section 7 permitted the state to exclude the Chinese from any portion of the state it saw fit to; and Section 9 denied anybody employing Chinese the right to vote.⁷²

It is important to note that the Chinese community was not silent during this ongoing political battle. One Chinese man, in particular, articulated his view of the debate in a series of letters that were published in the *San Francisco Argonaut* in August and September 1878. The letters were titled "Why Should the Chinese Go?" and were written by Kwang Chang Ling (also known as Alexander Del Mar), who was clearly familiar with the English language. His profound assessment of the "Chinese Question" is striking in its relevance for future economic and immigration issues, up to and including those facing America today:

The cry is here that the Chinese must go. I say that they should not go; that they can not go [sic]; will not go. More than this, that, were it conceivable that they went, your State would be ruined; in a word, that the Chinese population of the Pacific Coast have become indispensable to its continued prosperity, and that you cannot afford to part with them upon any consideration. . . . You may drive us out of California, but we shall influence your social affairs all the same. The goods that we now manufacture in San Francisco will be fabricated in Canton; and, no matter how high you may raise your tariff, you will walk in Canton shoes, wear Canton shirts, smoke Canton cigars, and shoot each other with Canton revolvers and gunpowder; for we can make all of them cheaper than you can.⁷³

In addition to astutely addressing the core of the "Chinese Question," Ling also comments on the hypocrisy of the reasons white Americans gave for wanting to limit Chinese immigration, among

⁷² Courtney 81-82.

⁷³ Alexander Del Mar, "Letters of Kwang Chang Ling. The Chinese Side of the Chinese Question" (San Francisco, 1878) 2, 7-8.

them the belief that Chinese practiced a "heathen religion." "Is it the religion of the Chinese residents in America of which you complain?" asks Ling. "What right have you to do this, with freedom of religion guaranteed in your Federal and State constitutions and a hundred monstrous sects flourishing in your midst and protected by your laws?"⁷⁴ Despite the pertinence of Ling's arguments, they were not widely embraced by Californians or, for that matter, Americans throughout the country. Ling and other Chinese who spoke out against the anti-Chinese movement were not successful in preventing even more devastating legislation.

Despite opposition from many in the eastern United States, anti-Chinese sentiment forced the passage of the "Fifteen Passenger Bill" in 1879, a federal law that limited the number of Chinese entering the country to fifteen per vessel.⁷⁵ In 1882, Congress went further, passing "An Act to Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to Chinese," commonly known as the 1882 Exclusion Act. The initial legislation was designed to prohibit the immigration of Chinese laborers for a period of twenty years. President Chester Arthur vetoed the bill, and a revised bill reducing the term to ten years was placed before the President and was signed into law. The heated 1880 Presidential election in which James Garfield narrowly won over Winfield S. Hancock illuminated for the nation that "The Chinese Question" was a litmus test for voting among many citizens of the western United States. In order to appeal to western voters, both parties began to speak out (to varying degrees) against Chinese immigration. Whether "The Chinese Question" was a national question or not, it had impacted national politics, and as such, Kearney and the Workingmen's Party of California would see the fruits of their labor. Two years later, Congress amended the Exclusion Act to eliminate loopholes regarding the

⁷⁴ Del Mar 9.

⁷⁵ McClain 147.

certification process through which Chinese non-laborers were able to enter the country.⁷⁶ An attempt at negotiating a treaty with China failed in 1888, resulting in the passage of The Scott Act, which was signed by President Cleveland in an attempt to encourage China to agree to the terms of the treaty, which prohibited any future Chinese immigration.

The original Exclusion Act was set to expire in 1892, prompting the passage of The Geary Act of 1892, which continued the Exclusion Act for an additional 10 years. The Act also required all Chinese in the United States to obtain and carry at all times a certificate of residence. Any Chinese found without a certificate would be deported unless he could show by the testimony of a white witness that he was a legitimate resident. In his book *In Search of Equality*, law historian Charles J. McClain notes that The Geary Act was "the first and only time that a federal statute sought to put a racial limitation on the right to testify in federal court."⁷⁷ The Exclusion Act was renewed and/or strengthened in federal legislation in 1894, 1898, 1902, and 1904, ensuring that "The Chinese Question" would remain in the national political climate.⁷⁸ Significantly, in all of this inflammatory anti-Chinese rhetoric, the topic of the railroad was largely ignored. Thus, the absence of Chinese railroad laborers – immortalized in the famous Promontory Summit photograph – continued in the national debate regarding Chinese immigration.

Popular Entertainment as Anti-Chinese Propaganda

While it is certainly true that talented rhetoricians like Denis Kearney were responsible for much of the success of the anti-Chinese movement in this country, it would be shortsighted to suggest that the political activism of anti-Chinese groups existed purely in political circles. In

⁷⁶ McClain 159.

⁷⁷ McClain 202-203.

⁷⁸ K. Scott Wong and Sucheng Chan, *Claiming America: Constructing Chinese American Identities During the Exclusion Era* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 6.

fact, a number of writers, performers, musicians, and artists participated in what K. Scott Wong suggests was "an early example of what is now often called a 'culture war.'"⁷⁹ In order to understand how politicians like Kearney were able to convince such a large number of people that the Chinese "must go," it is important to consider the kinds of information-sources that average Americans encountered in the second half of the nineteenth century. While Americans certainly read their newspapers, they also drank in the illustrations, songs, and plays that traveled the country, showing their audience the "history" that they were living. Thus, an examination of illustrations, songs, and plays reveals that Americans who may not have heard Kearney's Sandlot speeches would more than likely have received his message through popular entertainment.

Nineteenth-century Americans were used to seeing drawings in their periodicals, on posters, and on advertisements. To a large extent, the illustrations they saw reflected an increasing anti-Chinese sentiment. One of the prevailing political positions regarding the Chinese was that they were stealing jobs from white laborers because they would work for less money, not because they were any better at the jobs they performed than were their white counterparts. William Farwell, a member of the Special Committee of the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco, posed a rhetorical question in his lengthy preface to the Board's 1885 Report on the Condition of the Chinese Quarter: "Is it not the essence of folly to presume for an instant that the Central Pacific Railroad would not have been built had it not been for Chinese cheap labor?"⁸⁰ He went on to proclaim that white laborers could have done the work just as well, and that the Chinese were employed over whites only because they offered cheap labor. Farwell's preface represents one approach for turning American public opinion against the Chinese by

⁷⁹ Wong 3.

⁸⁰ William B. Farwell, *The Chinese At Home and Abroad. Together With the Report of the Special Committee of the Board of Supervisors of San Francisco, on the Condition of the Chinese Quarter of that City* (San Francisco: Bancroft, 1885) 76.

denying any real value in the labor of Chinese-Americans. In the process, he and others diminish the significance of the Chinese efforts in the construction of the railroad. The scene depicted in an 1867 edition of *Harper's Weekly* offers readers a "typical look" at railroad laborers that supports the notion that Chinese railroad laborers were not worth all that much (see fig. 2.3).

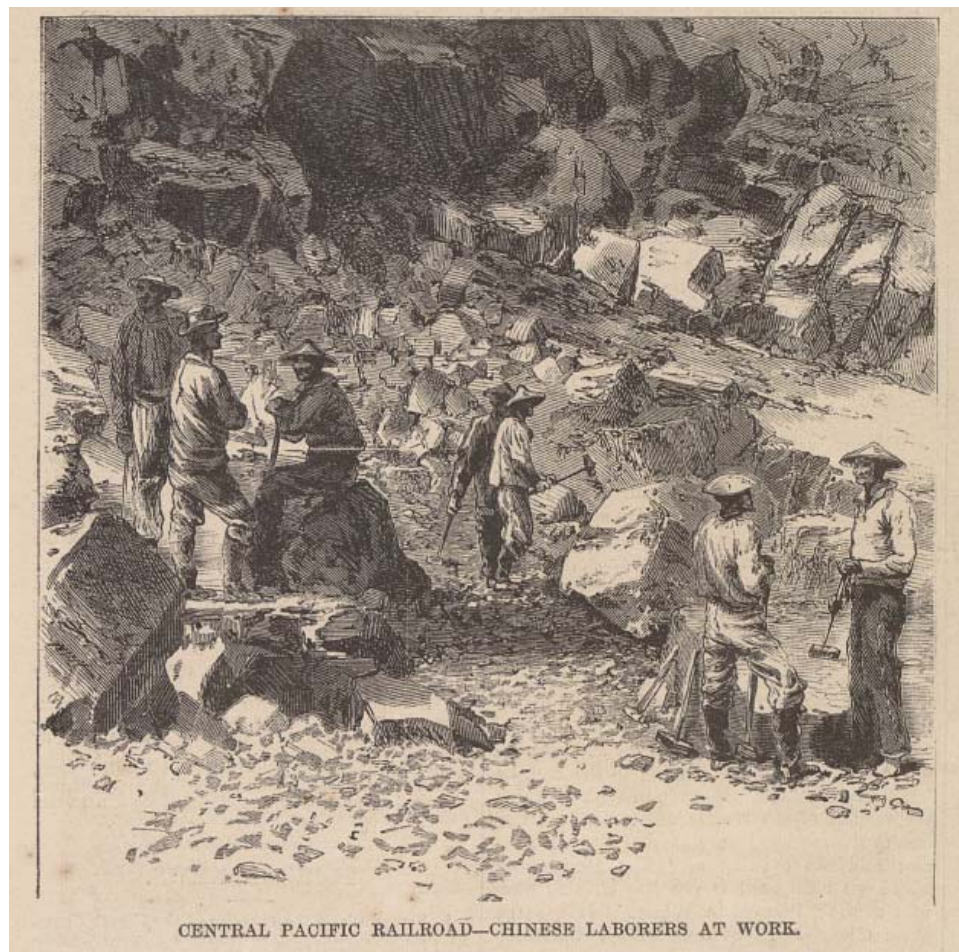


Figure 2.3. "Central Pacific Railroad – Chinese Laborers At Work."
Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
MTP/HW: Vol. 11:772.

Significantly, this illustration was published two years prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad, suggesting that the anti-Chinese sentiment inherent in the drawing was present – at least subconsciously – prior to the economic crisis of the 1870s. The men in the picture are Chinese, which fairly represents the proportion of Chinese to white laborers on the

Central Pacific line. However, none of the Chinese laborers appears to be actively engaged in construction duties. In fact, they seem to be "on break" from their jobs, chatting with one another. Such an image of Chinese railroad laborers, while acknowledging their presence, suggested that they were not really as industrious as their supporters claimed.



Figure 2.4. "What Shall We Do With Our Boys?"
 Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
 No. 292:136-137

Taking another approach, the illustrator of a cartoon in an 1882 edition of *The Wasp* offers an image of a Chinese laborer that does not deny the Chinese man's ability to do work well (see Fig. 2.4). This illustration contains two side-by-side pictures: on the left is a Chinaman with eleven hands, each of which is engaged in a working-class activity (i.e., ironing, cigar-rolling, cobbling, and carpentry); on the right, immediately outside the Chinaman's workshop, seven

white men and boys stand around with nothing to do. Through a juxtaposition of these two images the artist clearly argues that there is a direct correlation between the two pictures: the white men are unable to find jobs because the jobs are being stolen by the unnatural, frenetic work habits of the Chinese.

Illustrations denigrating Chinese Americans were not limited to periodicals; a number of advertising trade cards contained negative images of the Chinese. Significantly, the very nature

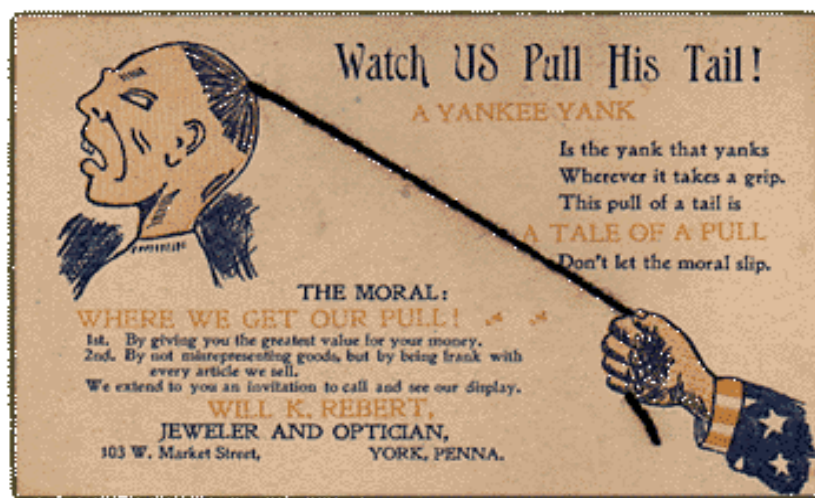


Figure 2.5. "Watch Us Pull His Tail."
Chinese Historical Society of America, Daniel K.E. Ching
Collection, CHSA-01118

of an advertising trade card suggests that the image of "The Heathen Chinese" was not just a political fad; it was a moneymaker. The advertising trade card shown in Figure 2.5, from the Daniel K.E. Ching Collection, depicts the Chinese-American's queue being tugged. "Tail-tugging" was a popular sport among young boys in frontier states, but the stereotypical action of pulling on a Chinese man's hair was clearly not confined to western states. This trade card advertises a Pennsylvania jeweler, and capitalizes on the word, "Yank" in its suggestion that the Chinese are not really Americans. "Watch Us Pull His Tail!" the card reads, followed by the

subtitle: "A Yankee Yank." As is typical of many nineteenth-century trade cards depicting Chinese, this advertisement seems to have gratuitously incorporated a Chinese man.

Continuing the trend of east coast companies utilizing anti-Chinese illustrations in an effort to sell goods, a New Jersey company selling rat poison issued the trading card shown in Figure 2.6. The company claims that their product will "clear out" rats, mice, flies, roaches, and bed bugs. Directly above the Chinese man's head, a motto reads, "They must go!" Given Denis Kearney's trademark use of this slogan in his anti-Chinese rhetoric, the advertisers clearly intend

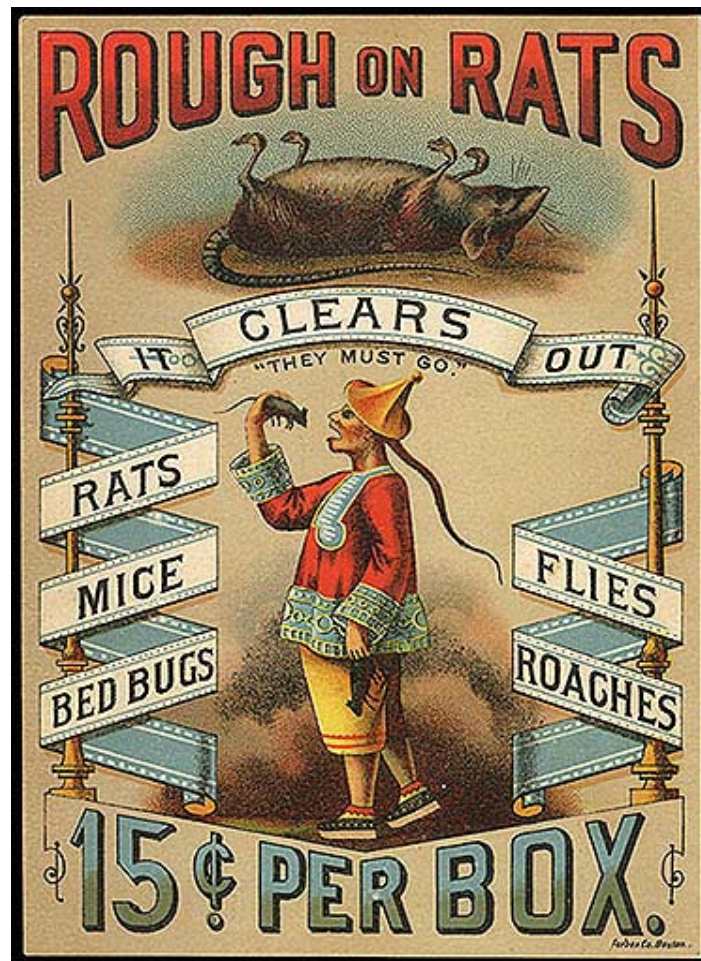


Fig. 2.6. "Rough on Rats"
Chinese Historical Society of America,
Daniel K.E. Ching Collection,
CHSA-01056

for this motto to apply both to the rats and the Chinese. The card exploits the stereotype that Chinese laborers ate mice and rats. Further, the exaggerated queue on the man's head serves to link the Chinese man with the rat he is about to eat, suggesting that the "Chinese Problem" was very much like a rodent problem. If only the rats could be cleared out, the nation would be free of germs, disease, and all sorts of pesky nuisances.



Figure 2.7. "The Chinese Problem Solved By Peerless Wringer"
Chinese Historical Society of America, Daniel K.E. Ching
Collection, CHSA-01029

A card issued by the Donaldson Brothers for their "Peerless Wringer" continues the blatant anti-Chinese rhetoric seen in "Rough on Rats." In this advertisement (see Fig. 2.7), a Chinese laundry man – named "Ah Sin" after Bret Harte's famous poem, "The Heathen Chinee" – panics when his queue gets caught in a new laundry machine. The text on the card further drives the point intended by the artist and the company that hired him:

The Chinese Question Solved by the Peerless Wringer.
Ah Sin Obeys! Though rather slow!
The Question's solved, Chinese must go.

Thus, in the advertisements for both the rat poison and the Peerless Wringer, advertisers use stereotypical images of Chinese laborers to illustrate a clear political message: "The Chinese Must Go."

Such a message was also carried to everyday Americans through melodic commentary. The majority of nineteenth-century songs concerning the Chinese featured Chinese "characters" who sang gibberish lyrics (see Chapter Three for such examples). "The Coolie Chinee" by Sep Winner, however, discussed the Chinese laborer from the point of view of a white American. The lyrics of this song describe an inept Chinese servant and culminate with a solution to the mishaps faced by the singer. Like "Rough on Rats," the song exploits a widely held stereotype that Chinese laborers ate rats and even served them to whites.

For dinner he gave us our little pet cat
And a cup of steaming hot tea.
Our supper he made from a cussed old rat
This troublesome Coolie Chinee.⁸¹

The narrator of the song goes on to describe the Chinese servant as a cheater and a liar. He ends the song with a clear warning to those within earshot:

Oh never be foolish, dear people, I pray
Oh never be silly like me,
And if you need help in the future, I pray,
Engage not a Coolie Chinee.

While the song does not use recognizable rhetorical slogans such as "They must go!" the message of the song is equally clear: the Chinese could not be trusted and it was up to ordinary American citizens to make sure they found no work in this country.

⁸¹ Sep Winner, "The Coolie Chinee: Humorous Song," *Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, 1870-1885*, Online, Library of Congress, 30 Nov. 2001.

"The Chinese Question" was also addressed on the nineteenth-century American stage. None other than Mark Twain, in a curtain speech made at the premiere of *Ah Sin*, his collaboration with Bret Harte, clearly spoke to the role of the theatre in examining political issues such as the question of Chinese immigration:

The Chinaman is getting to be a pretty frequent figure in the United States, and is going to be a great political problem, and we thought it well for you to see him on the stage before you had to deal with that problem.

Playwrights like Twain and Harte indeed offered images and commentary of "The Chinese Problem" to audiences who may or may not have had direct experience with Chinese laborers. Many of these images exploited numerous stereotypes regarding Chinese culture; a few went so far as to enter the anti-Chinese debate with blatant messages in support of Chinese Exclusion.

Joaquin Miller's 1876 play, *The Danites in the Sierras*, reflects growing concern with Chinese immigration; the hero of the play comments that the Chinese character wants to "bring out some more of his 70 cousins."⁸² This notion that Chinese laborers were depleting American financial resources provides the central tensions of Henry Grimm's 1879 *The Chinese Must Go*, a propaganda play that was performed in anti-Coolie clubs in California and Arizona and also received a performance at the Adelphi Theater in San Francisco on 13 November 1878.⁸³

Like most propaganda items, *The Chinese Must Go* relies on scare tactics to make its point. The play centers on the Blaine family, a white California family that is struggling to survive in an economically depressed era. Mr. Blaine blames the Chinese for his son Frank's inability to find work:

MRS. BLAINE: Why the devil don't you make Frank work?

MR. BLAINE: Haven't I been hunting for a place for years? Isn't every factory and every store crammed with those cursed Chinamen? . . .

⁸² Joaquin Miller, *The Danites in the Sierras*. *American Plays*, Ed. Allan Gates Halline (New York: American Book, 1935) 397.

⁸³ Dave Williams, ed., *The Chinese Other, 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays* (Lanham: UP of America, 1997).

Owing to the large immigration of coolies, it is almost impossible to find any kind of work suitable for a boy his age.⁸⁴

Mr. Blaine's conclusions seem verified by the comments of Chinese characters, who frequently brag about their ability to steal jobs from white men. Ah Coy, a trouble-making, opium-smoking Chinese laborer, expresses the sentiments supposedly held by Chinese immigrants: "By and by, no more white workingman in California; all Chinaman – sabee?"⁸⁵

Mr. Blaine serves as the spokesman for the anti-Chinese platform. His metaphors leave little room for doubt regarding the message of the play. After asking his daughter if she would ever marry a Chinaman, Mr. Blaine concludes "Oil and water won't mix; the lighter material will always be on top, and any one who believes that it will mix is a fool."⁸⁶ Clearly, the white man is the "lighter" material in Mr. Blaine's analogy.

Blaine's son, Frank, seems to have adopted his father's ideology. He explains the gravity of the Chinese Problem:

Now, what would you think of a man who would allow a lot of parasites to suck every day a certain quantity of blood out of his body, when he well knows that his whole constitution is endangered by this sucking process; mustn't he be either an idiot or intend self-destruction? And suppose those Chinese parasites should suck as much blood out of every state in the Union, destroying Uncle Sam's sinews and muscles, how many years do you think it would take to put him in his grave?⁸⁷

Perhaps even more damaging to the plight of the Chinese-Americans in this play, Grimm uses one of the Chinese characters to convey the same idea. Slim Chunk Pin, an agent of the "powerful Six Companies," speaks a similar objective; Slim Chunk Pin's speech, however, is in perfect English, heightening the threat of his ability to accomplish his goals. "In ten years

⁸⁴ Henry Grimm. *The Chinese Must Go, The Chinese Other, 1850-1925: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Dave Williams (Lanham: UP of America, 1997) 100, 104.

⁸⁵ Grimm 99.

⁸⁶ Grimm 112.

⁸⁷ Grimm 117.

more," he says, "California will be ours."⁸⁸ Slim Chunk Pin's facility with the English language reveals his unique position in the play and in the San Francisco culture depicted in the play: he is a "middle-man," able to easily communicate with both Chinese and Americans: "Slim Chunk Pin's impressive ability to negotiate with the coolie and the decadent Westerner . . . creates a new order of representation," writes James S. Moy.⁸⁹ This representation revealed a potential powder keg, for such a skilled Chinese individual is, in some ways, in a position of power above white men who are depending on him to translate their words accurately.

The intensity of the fear and hatred voiced by the Blaine family – and by the playwright – was an attempt to diffuse the threat of and discredit the accomplishments of all Chinese in America, including the Slim Chunk Pins. One way in which the play succeeded in removing the "Chinese threat" was by denying a Chinese presence on the stage: the actors playing Ah Coy, Slim Chunk Pin, and every other Chinese character in *The Chinese Must Go* were all white. Therefore, Slim Chunk Pin's threat is articulated by a white playwright, voiced by a white actor, and maliciously assigned to the Chinese who are, by all accounts, not at all represented on the stage.

The Chinese Must Go illustrates the use of theatre in the anti-Chinese movement. Henry Grimm was not the only theatre person participating in a larger political agenda to exclude Chinese from America. Grimm's political participation was limited to playwriting. Other theatre artists, however, extended their participation in the anti-Chinese movement beyond the walls of the theatre, establishing a bridge between the world of theatre and the world of political legislation.

⁸⁸ Grimm 102.

⁸⁹ James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City, IA: U of Iowa P, 1993) 44.

John Piper was the owner and manager of Piper's Opera House in Virginia City, Nevada, a popular performance hall in the last half of the nineteenth century. In addition to playing an active role in theatrical decisions, Piper was a political leader in the community. In fact, Piper served as the President of the Vigilance Committee of Virginia City.⁹⁰ Edmund Leathes, a touring actor who spent time on Piper's stage, recalls Piper's Opera House in his memoir: "Opera House it was called; what a place! . . . [U]nder the front of the house was the city lock-up."⁹¹ In addition to housing the town's prison, the Opera House served as a meeting place for Piper's political rallies, frequently advertised in the newspaper Piper published, *The Daily Stage*.

The Daily Stage served two purposes: first, it advertised the nightly bill for the Opera House; second, it offered Piper and his colleagues a platform from which to argue their anti-Chinese agenda. The paper seems to have become overtly political in 1880, during which year the newspaper began printing a message in the border of the nightly bill (see Fig. 2.8). Thus, as readers scanned to see what was playing at Piper's on any given night, they also read the words: "NO MORE CHINESE IMMIGRATION."⁹² On either side of the anti-Chinese border there were dozens of advertisements for local business, including saloons, banks, cigars, and furniture. It is unclear whether the business owners who chose to advertise alongside this anti-Chinese message were publicly aligning themselves with the political platform. Given that *The Daily Stage* is advertised as "the best advertising medium in the state," it may not have been economically feasible for these business owners to boycott advertising in the paper to make a political point.

⁹⁰ Edmund Leathes, *An Actor Abroad; or Gossip Dramatic, Narrative, and Descriptive From the Recollection of an Actor* (London: Hurst, 1880) 180.

⁹¹ Leathes 184.

⁹² For additional examples, see *The Daily Stage* (Virginia City, NV) in Oct. and Nov. 1880.

THE DAILY STAGE

VIRGINIA CITY STOSBY COUNTY, NEVADA. WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 1880.

THE DAILY STAGE IS THE BEST ADVERTISING MEDIUM IN THE STATE.

**PIPER'S
OPERA HOUSE.**

JOHN PIPER..... PROPRIETOR
W. G. CROSBIE..... MANAGER

WEDNESDAY EVENING, OCT. 6, 1880
Until Further Notice.

Entire Change Of Programme of The
**CALIFORNIA
SPECIALTY and DRAMATIC
COMPANY.**

PROGRAMME.
The Performance will Commence with Laughable Farce.

MR. and MRS. WHITE.

PETER WHITE.....	W. G. CROSBIE
Major Pepper.....	George Bailey
Frank Brown.....	F. J. Mackley
Mrs. PETER WHITE.....	FANNY YOUNG
Widow White.....	Arline Stanley
Kitty Clover.....	Carrie Armstrong

Overture..... Orchestra

Cummings and Harrington,
In their great Specialties
The Fascinating Serio-comic Vocalist.
Miss Carrie Armstrong.
Then comes the Champion Skipping Rope Dancer of the World.
Miss Lottie Elliot.
THE GREAT
JOHN GILBERT
Lightning (Chase) Artist, the
GREAT ZITELLA.
Followed by Laughable Skit, entitled
MR. and MRS. WOOD.
F. J. Mackley..... and..... Fanny Holloway
New Songs..... **MABEL VAUGHN**
The Fascinating Serio-comic Vocalist.
NEGO ECENTRICITIES.
Messrs. Gilbert, Cummings, Harrington, Davis, Warner
and Bailey.

Grand Saturday MATINEE for Ladies and Children.
Monday evening, October 11, first appearance of **MR. GEORGE FRANCE** and his highly trained dog, Dingo, in the Sensational

"NO MORE CHINESE IMMIGRATION" - NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM.

Figure 2.8. *The Daily Stage*, October 6, 1880

During elections, Piper filled the column with messages like "Democrats Register! American Citizens Register. Free Men Register." Shortly before the Presidential election of 1880, Piper organized an anti-Chinese rally at the Opera House and advertised the rally in his newspaper: "Grand Democratic Anti-Chinese Torchlight Demonstration at Virginia City,

Saturday Oct. 30, 1880. Let Every Man Who is Opposed to Chinese Carry a Torch. Speaking at the Opera House."⁹³

On Election Day, 1880, Piper filled the column typically reserved for the nightly billing with a letter to all Americans. While the letter is quite lengthy, I quote it extensively to illustrate the way in which Piper utilized his theatre and its advertisements for an anti-Chinese agenda:

Americans, Attention!!

American Citizens: Remember that the future prosperity of the Pacific coast hangs in the balance.

Cast aside your partisanship, be American citizens, and vote for the good of your country.

Washington was neither a Republican or [sic] a Democrat. He was an American citizen.

If the galling chains of partisanship hamper you, trample them under your feet and be free men.

When partisanship means to vote for a party whether it is right or wrong partisanship is a curse. It may be the last chance you will ever have to rid yourself of the "regular Chinese" Curse.

Remember that one vote may be the means of saving the Pacific coast from utter ruin. . . .

Citizens, which party was it that nominated a candidate for President who fought harder against the Fifteen-Passenger Bill than any other man in Congress? Does it go to reason that a man who voted against restricting the "regular Chinese" even to fifteen in a vessel is now against "regular Chinese?" Think of it. Does it not look like a bait to catch the votes of the Pacific coast? . . .

Which party in this State to-day is running a candidate for the United States Senate who employs "regular Chinese" by the thousand to the exclusion of white men, and with the impudence and hypocrisy of Old Satan, is insulting your intelligence by telling [sic] you that the "regular Chinese question is not a party question."

Vote against the Rice-and-Rat Party.⁹⁴

On the same day, Piper published a correspondence from James A. Garfield, the Republican nominee for President of the United States. In this letter, Garfield explains that he feels Americans should be able to employ whomever they wish, including Chinese laborers. At the top of the letter, Garfield has written "Personal and Confidential." Clearly, Mr. Piper did not

⁹³ "Grand Democratic Anti-Chinese Torchlight Demonstration," *The Daily Stage*. Virginia City, Nevada. 28 Oct. 1880.

⁹⁴ "Americans, Attention!!" *The Daily Stage*. Virginia City, Nevada. 2 Nov. 1880.

respect Garfield's confidence, as the letter was duplicated and printed in its entirety in *The Daily Stage*.

Piper, who was later elected a state senator, was not without enemies in Virginia City. According to Leathes, Piper's Opera House "had been maliciously set alight on seven different occasions by some incendiary enemy . . . ; but owing to the constant watch kept upon the building, night and day, it escaped destruction each time."⁹⁵ Perhaps Piper's paranoia, manifest in his extreme fear of Chinese immigration, ultimately saved his theatre from fire; but it also helped to fuel anti-Chinese hatred throughout the state. John Piper, his Opera House, and his newspaper offer a unique perspective on a theatre manager who used his position to promote a policy of Chinese exclusion.

The Destruction of a “Grand Vista”

I began this chapter with a beautiful scene from DeMille's *The Main Line*. The grand panorama, and others like it, may very well have shaped the aesthetic eye of DeMille's famous filmmaking son, Cecil. It also, however, excluded key figures from view. It was rare to see a play in nineteenth-century America that portrayed both the grandeur of the railroad and the efforts of the minority laborers who made it possible. Such a removal of minorities from the railroad made possible a history of the railroad that ignored ethnic contributions.

One nineteenth-century play, however, does *not* remove the Chinese laborer from the scene of the railroad. Nevertheless, it, too, presents a distorted view of American railroad history. Frank Dumont's *Little Miss Nobody* (1897) is set along the Northern Pacific Railroad, and begins with a scene very much like that presented in *The Main Line*: The curtain rises on a railroad station, with a railroad track running parallel to the back of the stage, immediately in front of a landscape curtain. A saloon is located stage right and the station house is situated

⁹⁵ Leathes 289-290.

stage left. A telegraph wire runs alongside the tracks. In addition to these visual indicators, the setting is clearly established in the first seconds of the play: "At rise of curtain, whistle and railroad imitation of train speeding away in the distance."⁹⁶

A peaceful scene, but one that is immediately interrupted: the very next sound of the play is that of a white man yelling, "Get out, ye yaller-faced nigger, get out!" as a Chinaman is tossed out of the saloon and lands center stage. Thus, in the first scene of *Little Miss Nobody*, we see the humiliation of a Chinese character (Gee Ho) immediately in front of a railroad track and directly following an image of a working train. The audience is given no indication that Gee Ho was a railroad laborer or that countless other Chinese men worked to build the railroads. Rather, the audience sees that Chinese do not belong.

A later scene in *Little Miss Nobody* separates the Chinese character from the accomplishment of the railroad even more blatantly. In this case, the villain wishes to kill the stationmaster and his daughter. Once he thinks they are both in the station house, he approaches Gee Ho and asks him to burn down the house with the people inside. Gee Ho does not respond with words, but he is quickly seen setting a torch to the station house. The house ignites, flames quickly spreading. Due to the proximity of the station house to the tracks, it is virtually impossible that the railroad ties would have escaped unburned. Gee Ho has successfully destroyed the railroad station. Thus, rather than acknowledge the Chinese contribution to the construction of the railroad, Dumont shows us an image of a dangerous man who destroys the thing he and his people labored to build. Gee Ho is seen as a threat to the railroad, and, by extension, as a threat to America.

⁹⁶ Frank Dumont, *Little Miss Nobody* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1916) 9.

Chapter 3

“I Been Workin' In the Laundry”: The Role of Performance in the Recasting of Minority Railroad Laborers as Menial Labor

One of the most popular plays of the late nineteenth century, Bartley Campbell's 1879 *My Partner*, enjoyed revival after revival on the New York stage and across the nation earning its star actors hundreds of thousands of dollars. Audiences packed into theatres to witness Louis Aldrich and Charles Parsloe perform the roles written specifically for them. As the play begins, the Irish maid utters the first line, yelling for the Chinese servant, Wing Lee:

POSIE. Wing Lee! Wing Lee! What on earth has become of that Chinaman? It's always the way! . . . Talk about Chinese cheap labor, why when it comes to a pinch, they ain't worth a bit a day.¹

Ten years after the completion of the transcontinental railroad, audiences in California and Nevada sat in theatres furnished with the help of rail transportation and witnessed Aldrich and Parsloe, who traveled by train to perform for them. While the play, the actors, and the audience had been made infinitely more accessible because of the railroad, Posie opens the play with a speech in which she disparages Chinese labor – the very labor that made the railroad possible. She has, in effect, validated Wing's placement at the margins. It does not take a genius – in fact only an Irish maid – to conclude that Chinese laborers should be condemned to "the cupboard of social memory" where they would eventually rot into skeletons of no consequence.

Beyond a mere "omission" of the Chinese contribution in railroad construction, Posie's speech –and the subsequent characterization of Wing Lee and countless other Chinese men on the frontier – serve to redefine what Chinese laborers offered to their communities. The reality of efficient and innovative Chinese labor was replaced with an image of Chinese men who were capable of little more than the "woman's" job of doing the laundry. Irish, Black, and Mormon

¹ Bartley Campbell, *My Partner*. *Favorite American Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Barret H. Clark (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1943) 49.

railroad laborers were similarly nudged away from the railroad and towards more menial occupations in nineteenth-century songs and plays.

This re-scripting of ethnic labor seems especially significant when placed in the context of the reality of railroad construction. Completed on May 10, 1869, in Promontory Summit, Utah, the nation's first transcontinental railroad sparked a simultaneous celebration from sea to sea, from the Canadian border to the Gulf Coast. The grand, glorious image of the Iron Horse served as a beacon of hope to Americans searching for a better life following the war, a war that was fought, at least in part, to liberate thousands of slaves and to denounce once and for all the notion that a human being could be only 3/5ths of a person.

It is ironic then, that the railroad – this symbol of unity – relied upon a very large immigrant work force that was, in many cases, treated as less than human. The United States of America embraced and promoted an image of unity that was made possible by the blood and sweat of immigrant labor; it was also, however, an image of unity that excluded this immigrant work force from the benefits of the unity they labored to construct. The Iron Horse belonged in Herodotus's narrative; the skeleton-laborers did not.

Because I am interested in the intersection between the transcontinental railroad and laborers in nineteenth century images, I am particularly interested in songs, minstrel acts, and plays that are set in that region of the country in which the Union Pacific and Central Pacific companies laid rails: the western United States, the "frontier." Thus, many of the visual and dramatic images I will explore in this chapter come from "frontier songs" and "frontier dramas" that were set in the American West and which concerned uniquely frontier scenarios. These songs and plays were set in the west and concerned the lives of pioneers; frontier songs and dramas emphasized those aspects of life that were celebrated on the frontier – nature,

masculinity, pluckiness, and courage. These songs and dramas may have told "western" stories of wagon trains and Native Americans, but performances of these acts were not limited to frontier playhouses. In fact, the majority of frontier dramas discussed in this chapter were performed in New York City (albeit the "lesser" playhouses) and were written and marketed for stock companies. One might wonder, then, if these frontier songs and plays were in reality nothing more than "east coast" interpretations of what life on the frontier must be like. While there were undoubtedly songwriters and playwrights who wrote about the frontier with no first-hand knowledge of life in the western states, the majority of writers examined in this chapter gained familiarity with the west through their travels as actors and journalists. "Frontier songs" and "frontier dramas" were not necessarily written by frontiersmen, and they weren't performed solely in the frontier. Thus, the term "frontier song" or "frontier dramas" has more to do with the content of the song or play than it does with the site of performance.

The plays that form the bulk of this chapter can be further classified as "mining dramas," plays that portray the gold and silver mines of California, Nevada, and Colorado. Indeed many of the plays I'll be examining, while written in the post-railroad era of 1870-1900, are set in the gold rush days of the early 1850s. How do images of such mining communities have any bearing on an examination of the dramatic portrayal of the railroad and its laborers? There are at least three justifications for including mining dramas in this study. First, many of the railroad laborers (including Chinese and Irish laborers) had been miners prior to the construction of the railroad; as mines dried up, miners were forced to find other jobs, often on railroad crews. Second, these plays were written during the years immediately following the completion of the transcontinental railroad and in the height of an anti-Chinese political movement in the western States. Thus any images of Chinese and other minorities in these mining dramas are certainly

relevant when placed in the larger context of labor and politics. Finally, an examination of these mining dramas may be the *only* way to determine the representation of the men who actually built the railroad, for songwriters, artists, and playwrights seem not to have presented Black, Mormon, and Chinese railroad laborers *as* railroad laborers in nineteenth-century popular entertainment. Instead, plays such as DeMille's *The Main Line*, Lincoln Carter's *The Fast Mail*, and Scott Marble's *The Great Train Robbery*, present railroad laborers who are generically Caucasian.

After offering a cursory description of Irish, Black, Mormon, and Chinese "stage types," in nineteenth-century popular entertainment, I will present a closer examination of the presence of these types in frontier melodramas written between 1870 and 1900, specifically Joaquin Miller's *The Danites in the Sierras* (1877), Mark Twain and Bret Harte's *Ah Sin* (1877), Bartley Campbell's *My Partner* (1879), and Bernard Francis Moore's *Poverty Flats* (1899). An analysis of these four plays, sprinkled with examples from a dozen other nineteenth-century plays, will clearly establish a standard "type" of ethnic and minority characters in frontier drama.

Yet in a half-century riddled with bitter debate over slavery, "The Chinese Question," and immigration policy, it is not surprising that some writers and artists offered contrasting images of minority laborers. Thus, following my analysis of ethnic stock characters, I will explore two plays that offer at least partially resistant images of Chinese characters: Ambrose Bierce's *Peaceful Expulsion* (date unknown); and Frank Powers's *The First Born* (1897).

The Men Who Built the Railroad

Nineteenth-century popular images of the railroad offer evidence of its economic and practical benefits, its magnificent power, and its unique association with American unity. While a few songs and plays written during the railroad era depict Irish workers, these popular

entertainments rarely offer images of other ethnic workers who laid the tracks and united the States, particularly the Mormons and the Chinese. With the exception of earlier works like Custis's *The Rail Road*, which honored Irish laborers, railroad workers, if shown at all, were presented as Caucasian.

Most Americans know that the Irish worked for the Union Pacific, laying rails east from Omaha. Yet the Irish did not labor exclusively for the UP. In fact, a number of Irish worked on the rival Central Pacific, supervising an army of Chinese laborers. In addition, the Irish men who worked on the transcontinental railroad in the 1860s were not the first generation of Irish rail layers in the United States. The Irish were instrumental in the construction of many of the lines in the eastern United States, including the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad that George Washington Parke Custis celebrates in his 1828 play, *The Rail Road*. The work was dangerous, as can be evidenced from a recent archeological dig in Philadelphia in which William Watson is leading efforts to locate the bodies of 57 Irish railroad workers who died in 1832. Watson's research on Philadelphia railroad construction indicates that the vast majority of workers were immigrants from Ireland who came to the United States as skilled laborers. While Watson is unsure of how the 57 Irish men died, he suspects that the men may have been victims of anti-Irish violence, suggesting that they may have been "murdered by local vigilante groups who were violently hostile toward Irish immigrants."²

Historically, Black railroad laborers are most commonly associated with track laying in the Southeastern United States in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Prior to the Civil War, Black railroad laborers did not have much to say about their jobs on the tracks; slave labor was instrumental in building a network of rails in the South. Following the Civil War, some Black

² Ray O'Hanlon, "News Briefs: Philly Find Could Be Vital Clue," *The Irish Echo* 78.26 (2005) Online, Accessed 29 Jun 2005.

railroad workers traveled north and west for work. The legend of John Henry arises from this era. Historian Brett Williams articulates the process through which a real man named John Henry (or possibly John Hardy) grew into a mythological figure glorified in one of the most popular folk ballads ever written in the United States:

Even among heroes John Henry is extraordinary, for his fame rests on a single epic moment when he raced and defeated a steam drill destined to take away his job. That moment has captured the imagination of balladeers and storytellers for the last century, and in their songs and tales they have woven for John Henry a whole life.³

Williams goes on to note that while a freed slave named John Henry more than likely labored on the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroads, it is unclear whether there was ever a contest between Henry and a steam drill. Such is the nature of legends: for the thousands of railroad laborers who labored in the late nineteenth century and beyond, John Henry's life – imaginary or not – became a truth in their daily lives, a truth that made daily toiling bearable, and a truth that fostered a "united front" among railroad laborers who attempted to stand up against corporate and industrial threats. Southern Black freedmen, much like John Henry, made their mark on history and on the landscape of the eastern United States. Yet these freedmen did not only labor in the east. It is significant to note that Black laborers, recently freed from slavery in the war to reunite the States, participated in an effort to unite the nation economically and geographically. While significantly smaller in number than their Irish colleagues, approximately 300 former slaves were instrumental in laying tracks across the Wyoming desert and other stretches along the Union Pacific line.⁴

The Mormons were perhaps the savviest of the minority groups laboring on the first transcontinental railroad; their leader, Brigham Young, found himself in a position of power,

³ Brett Williams, *John Henry: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1983) 3.

⁴ Stephen Ambrose, *Nothing Like It In the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 177, 274.

being sought after by both the Union Pacific and Central Pacific bosses.⁵ Young contracted approximately 3,000 men to work for the Union Pacific. He assured the Union Pacific that he would work only with them; however, he encouraged three other top Mormon leaders to contract workers to the Central Pacific. Thus Young was able to play each company against the other, demanding higher wages than the companies offered for their other laborers.⁶ In all, over 5,000 Mormon men laid track in the mountains of Utah. While Americans today are probably more aware of Chinese and Irish laborers on the transcontinental line, citizens in 1869 could not have missed the prominence of the Mormons at the ceremony uniting the tracks at Promontory Summit: though Brigham Young shunned the ceremony for political reasons, the Saints were represented by several high ranking Mormon officials, including the mayor of nearby Ogden, Utah.⁷ While Mormon laborers may have been more represented at the Promontory ceremony than were their Chinese and Black colleagues, they were not given more respect in the day-to-day, economic reality of railroad construction. As the Mormon leaders rode in luxury aboard the ceremonial locomotives in Promontory, Mormon laborers had been paid less than half of what was owed to them by both the Union Pacific and Central Pacific companies.

Unlike Mormon railroad laborers, who were widely recognized in the nineteenth century but largely ignored in twenty- and twenty-first century popular railroad discourse, Chinese railroad laborers have received a great deal of attention in the last fifty years in an attempt to rectify their widespread erasure in nineteenth-century documents. By far, Chinese laborers were the largest ethnic group to work on the transcontinental railroad, numbering approximately 10,000 at the height of construction on the Central Pacific line. The contribution of Chinese laborers to the railroad effort cannot be overstated. The western portion of the transcontinental

⁵ David Haward Bain, *Empire Express* (New York: Viking, 1999) 605.

⁶ Ambrose 283, 329; Bain 605.

⁷ Bain 659-660.

railroad was begun in Sacramento in 1863, with a work force made up largely of Irish laborers. By 1865, only 30 miles of track had been laid. At that time, General Superintendent Charles Crocker announced his next move: he would hire Chinese workers to lay the tracks. By the end of that year, 7,000 Chinese and just under 2,000 Euro-American laborers were employed by the Central Pacific.

The Chinese laborers were well respected by the company owners, if not by their Irish colleagues. Crocker recalled the company's favorable opinion of their Chinese crews:

"Wherever we put them we found them good, and they worked themselves into our favor to such an extent that if we found we were in a hurry for a job or work, it was better to put Chinese on at once."⁸ Collis Huntington, one of the four partners in the Central Pacific, approved of the use of Chinese laborers, writing to Crocker on October 3, 1867: "I like your idea of getting over more Chinamen. It would be all the better for us and the State if there should be a half million come over in 1868."⁹ In fact, the upper echelons of the railroad and investment companies must have been more than happy to use Chinese labor; these individuals saved an estimated \$5.5 million by employing Chinese rather than white laborers between 1866-1869.¹⁰ Clearly, the men who stood to profit the most from railroad construction were all in favor of Chinese labor.

Four years after Crocker's initial hire of Chinese laborers, the Central Pacific had finished its section of the transcontinental railroad. Not only did the Chinese laborers lay the majority of the tracks, they also solved engineering problems that puzzled their white superiors.¹¹ They worked longer hours and for less pay than their white counterparts. If the railroad effort had continued at the pace established by Euro-American laborers in Sacramento between 1863 and

⁸ Bain 221.

⁹ Ambrose 243.

¹⁰ Ronald Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1990) 230.

¹¹ Stan Steiner, *Fusang: The Chinese Who Built America* (New York: Harper, 1979) 125-140.

1865 (15 miles a year), the transcontinental railroad would not have been completed until roughly 1913. Owner (and Governor of California) Leland Stanford once wrote to President Johnson: "Without the Chinese it would have been impossible to complete the western portion of this great National highway."¹² Whether on the Central Pacific, the Union Pacific, or the lines that connected Omaha to the east coast, the efforts of Irish, Black, Mormon, and Chinese railroad laborers proved to be invaluable in the economic and technological advances of the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

Removing Railroad Laborers from the Rails in Popular Entertainment

Despite the irrefutable contributions of ethnic laborers in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, many nineteenth-century musicians, songwriters, and artists used popular entertainment as a means to distance the men who built the railroad from the symbol of unity that was the Iron Horse. Nineteenth-century entertainers were striving to "explain" to American audiences just what a "Chinese," "Black," or "Mormon" person looked like and was good for. Irish, Black, Mormon, and Chinese characters were inserted into popular songs and melodramas as a comic device, but also as a means for devaluing the humanity of these laborers.

In *Misreading the Chinese Character*, Dave Williams argues that

[t]he Other does not usually conveniently disappear of its own accord, but typically remains a prominent, intrusive irritant. Some mental mechanism must come into play to render the Other's strangeness psychologically and emotionally innocuous. Distorted or incomplete representation (whether created consciously or not) allows individuals and cultures to assimilate material that would otherwise be hopelessly threatening and bizarre.¹³

¹² Ambrose 164.

¹³ Dave Williams, *Misreading the Chinese Character: Images of the Chinese in Euroamerican Drama to 1925*. (New York: Lang, 2000) 11.

In other words, ethnic characters in nineteenth-century songs and plays serve to ease Americans' unease with minorities by creating a comical representation of ethnic characters that clearly removes any threat to "real" (i.e. "white") Americans.

With the exception of some Irish characters in the late nineteenth century, Irish, Black, Mormon, and Chinese characters in nineteenth-century entertainments were invariably performed by white singers and actors who were not part of the ethnic group they caricatured. Thus, while these ethnic characters were present in American popular entertainment, the ethnicities themselves were removed from view. The ethnicity that was offered to the audience, then, was not necessarily a realistic representation; it was, however, generally accepted as genuine by the members of the audience. For many in the audience, "ethnicity" was indicated by "appearance." A Black person had dark skin; a Chinese person had slanted eyes and a pigtail; etc. The extraordinary popularity of physiognomy in the United States at this time suggests that these outward manifestations of race and ethnicity represented what many Americans already believed about ethnic minorities: the external "flaws" and "eccentricities" were indicators of the total inferiority of minorities. Kennan Ferguson comments on the foregrounding of external racial characteristics in a recent article on the performance of race and culture: "Race as a cultural marker has the obvious advantage of being immediately apparent, at least putatively: physical characteristics, visible to the naked eye, act as the markers of culture."¹⁴ Through performance, the silly behavior of the externally constructed Stage Chinaman or the Stage Negro becomes inextricably linked to the perceived character of the minority's culture.

James S. Moy reminds us that this phenomenon of staging the other is not limited to nineteenth-century America: "Since the beginning of the Western tradition in drama, dominant cultures have represented marginal or foreign racial groups in a manner that presents these

¹⁴ Kennan Ferguson, "How Peoples Get Made: Race, Performance, Judgment," *Theory & Event* 1.3 (1997): 2.

characters as othered – that is, not only as different from people in the dominant culture but also as less than completely human or civilized."¹⁵ One way to prove the superiority of white America was to confirm through performance the assumptions of physiognomy, that non-whites were – by nature – less than human. Because these performances were created and enacted by white artists, the "characteristic" physical traits of minorities (i.e. dark skin, slanted eyes, big lips) were exaggerated, further suggesting to the audience that the behavior of minority characters on stage is a direct result of the primitiveness that can be plainly read on their faces.

Although Irish-Americans had more opportunities in nineteenth-century popular entertainment than did their Black, Mormon, and Chinese counterparts, the standard "Stage Irishman" was cemented by non-Irish white men. In his 1952 study, "The Immigrant Theme on the American Stage," Carl Wittke notes this of the representation of the Irish character in nineteenth century America:

Costumed in ragged and dirty clothes, he usually was portrayed as an impudent, pugnacious, and eloquent character who swung a wicked shillelah [sic] for the protection of widows, children, and Irish maidens about to be seduced.¹⁶

Roger Hall expands upon Wittke's description in his 2001 book, *Performing the American Frontier*, emphasizing the frequency with which Irish characters were prone to the bottle: "The Irish – males and females – were played for comedy, and the Irish males almost always drank excessively."¹⁷ The Stage Irishman became so popular, in fact, that "by the 1830s Paddy had

¹⁵ James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993) 1.

¹⁶ Carl Wittke, "The Immigrant Theme on the American Stage." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 39.2 (1952): 211-232.

¹⁷ Roger A. Hall, *Performing the American Frontier, 1870-1906* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 7.

already supplanted Jonathan, the indigenous Yankee character, as the principal comic figure of the American stage."¹⁸

Like Irish characters, Blacks were also utilized for comic effects. Hall notes that Blacks in frontier dramas were "generally male" and "were usually portrayed as slow-witted and afraid of the dangers of their western surroundings."¹⁹ This is particularly ironic, given that the Blacks (and indeed, the Chinese) were frequently referred to as "savages," the very creatures that should have felt right at home in the untamed west. By calling Black characters "savages" while at the same time revealing them to be less equipped for danger than (semi-)civilized white frontiersmen, nineteenth-century popular entertainers managed to devalue both the humanity and the manhood of African-Americans in the western United States.

The dangers and violence of the frontier also played into the representation of Mormon characters in nineteenth-century popular entertainment. Mormon characters were frequently portrayed as polygamous men who murdered non-Mormons, sometimes in church-sanctioned acts of violence. The 1857 Mountain Meadow Massacre, in which Mormons and Native Americans are said to have slaughtered 120 emigrants traveling west in a wagon train, prompted fear in the western states and, indeed, throughout the nation. While the events of the Massacre have never been fully sorted out, most Americans believed that Mormons were responsible for the murders in an effort to keep the Utah territory free of non-Mormons, and to prove that the law of Brigham Young trumped the laws of the United States in Utah. Megan Sanborn Jones notes that

The representations of Mormon murderers in popular culture were an exaggerated construction that addressed intangible anxieties about the use of violence in American society. They also addressed more specific anxieties about the rapidly

¹⁸ William H.A. Williams, *'Twas Only An Irishman's Dream: The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800-1920* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1996), 64.

¹⁹ Hall 7.

growing Mormon society in Utah that did not follow the patterns of lawmaking evident in other parts of the West.²⁰

Thus, Mormon characters in nineteenth-century popular entertainment were, like most ethnic and minority characters, complicated hybrids of observed reality, ignorant speculation, exhilarating freak show, and rampant fear.

The stock "Chinaman" in nineteenth-century popular entertainment was also a product of fear. Across the nation, but particularly in the western United States, white laborers campaigned against Chinese immigration, arguing that Chinese laborers stole jobs from Americans and that the "Mongolians" were leaching money from America only to return to China with their riches. What may have been a legitimate fear spiraled, targeting characteristics of Chinese men that had nothing to do with their presence in the workforce: their appearance, their eating habits, their speech, and their religion. Before long, popular entertainers had created a "John Chinaman" that ridiculed and exaggerated the appearance, diet, and religion of Chinese men and held these up as an argument against their trustworthiness as laborers in the American economy. Dave Williams encapsulates the typical Chinaman in nineteenth-century popular entertainment, who is invariably the only Chinese character in the play, song, or artwork:

This single Chinese person is almost always a young bachelor, whose long queue and loose work clothing make blending into his environment impossible; he also eats strange food. His [sic] has low status in the predominantly Euroamerican society which surrounds him, and he earns his living either as a domestic servant or by doing menial work such as washing clothes. He cannot speak English well, and his strong accent and distinctive mispronunciations regularly evoke ridicule or scorn from Euroamericans. His own name frequently resembles a strange or humorous English combination of words, and he lacks any personal history valuable enough to be reported. . . . Whether drunk or sober, he is physically clumsy; his ineptitude usually endangers only himself, however, and consequently appears more comic than menacing.²¹

²⁰ Megan Sanborn Jones, "Rapists, Murderers, and Turks: Anti-Mormon Melodrama and American Identity, 1845-1900," diss., U of Minnesota, 2004, 216.

²¹ Williams, *Misreading* 186.

The description of the Stage Chinaman offered by Williams perfectly illustrates the kind of "western gaze" through which Americans viewed Chinese. In his 1993 examination of the representation of Asians in America, James S. Moy describes two forms of the "empowering gaze" with which Western audiences viewed Chinese: 1) the serial gaze (amusements, circus acts, museum exhibitions) which "offered an amusingly empowering yet dismissive gaze to entertain the masses;" and 2) the voyeuristic gaze which moved beyond mere entertainment and "served to affirm the authority of the looker, generally at the expense of the object – which in turn was often reduced to stereotype."²² According to Moy, as the nineteenth century progressed, and as "the Chinese question" became increasingly significant, playwrights, songwriters, and audiences began to turn a new gaze on the Chinese: a combined "voyeuristic-serial" gaze. This new gaze "transcended the expectations of its previously separate audiences." The Chinese character was inserted into plays/songs not just for amusement but also as a means for self-definition and affirmation on the part of the writers and audiences. Moy suggests that this voyeuristic-serial gaze had "the potential for a persuasive sense of authenticity."²³

This "authentic" Chinese character on stage and in song was clumsy, deceitful, and the butt of jokes, but he was also a feminized image; the Stage Chinaman's long hair and full, skirt-like pants physicalized the perceived "femininity" inherent in the laundry and servant positions these characters occupied on stage. Significantly, while many Chinese laborers did work in "feminine" jobs, countless others constructed the railroad, cleared swamps to be made into farmland, and performed other strenuous jobs. Dave Williams suggests that playwrights and songwriters intentionally omitted images of the Chinese as strong workers:

²² Moy 8.

²³ Moy 17.

The occupations Euroamerican playwrights gave their Chinese characters also seem to be attempts to render them passive, feminine, and harmless. The Euroamerican miners, merchants, gunfighters, and adventurers in these plays, whether villains or heroes, all display individualism, autonomy, and energy in the pursuit of their goals. By contrast, the Chinese characters resemble the contemporary stereotype of women in their lack of freedom and initiative. They exist only on the margins of society in menial and feminized occupations.²⁴

More so than other minority characters, the Stage Chinaman offered an exaggerated and feminized image of what Chinese Americans were actually like in nineteenth-century America.

Thus, just as with Irish, Black, and Mormon characters, Chinese characters in popular entertainment were really caricatures that exaggerated their differences from white Americans, warning audiences of their inherent untrustworthiness while at the same time using comic effects to render these minority characters unable to use their differences as weapons against "real" Americans. Many frontier songs, cartoons, and plays contain examples of these stock characters. These nineteenth-century popular entertainments caricatured and removed from unity virtually every minority that labored on the railroad, reducing the reality of their monumental accomplishments to a pathetic image of inept, menial labor.

The "Frontier Irishman" in Popular Entertainment

For the most part, nineteenth-century popular songs about the frontier did not contain dehumanizing caricatures of the Irish, perhaps because by the time miners and pioneers had developed the frontier into a topic of fascination, the Irish had already managed to position themselves as primary players in the minstrel scene, the form of popular entertainment that found enormous success on frontier stages. In fact, several of the pioneers of blackface minstrelsy were Irish, and numerous Irish entertainers moved on to vaudeville and melodrama after getting their starts in minstrelsy.²⁵ In his 1996 study of the representation of Irish Americans in popular

²⁴ Williams, *Misreading* 189.

²⁵ Williams 65.

music, William Williams explains the process through which Irish Americans began to reshape the Stage Irishman by becoming key players in the entertainment scene:

As the Irish became involved in commercial entertainment, as performers, writers, and as audiences, they became part of the calculus for financial success. Eventually images that threatened to offend either the cultural mainstream or the Irish might have jeopardized sales. Gradually, then, elements of the image of the Irish and Ireland that appeared on stage and in song had to be "negotiated."²⁶

Despite the presence of Irish Americans in the entertainment scene, some derogatory images of the Stage Irishman persisted. Popular dramatists such as L.S. Powell, J.C. Frank, Bernard Francis Moore, and Charles Townsend, included stereotypical images of Irish men and women in their plays.

Conn; or, Love's Victory (1885), penned by Powell and Frank, offers a derogatory and potentially dangerous image of Irish in the frontier. In this melodrama, a band of Irish miners, led by Jim Brady, devise a scheme that will simultaneously ruin their boss and frame the hero of the play. Indeed, the first scene of the play finds the Irishmen drinking in a tavern, vowing to strike against the boss who has just fired Brady. Brady's speech is typical of the stage Irishman in frontier drama: "I will be revenged on ould Meiklam, come what may. . . . Begorry, it makes my blood boil in my veins when I think of the rich ould devil, wid his foine airs . . ."²⁷ The Irish characters in *Conn, or Love's Victory* are presented as problems on a number of levels: first, they are drinkers; second, they are vindictive; and finally – and perhaps most seriously – they are not afraid to strike. Strikes were not good news in the frontier, and owners and bosses went to great lengths to ensure that they hired men who would not be likely to unionize against them. Thus, the Irishmen in *Conn* are characters that must be dealt with. As the action progresses, the villainous Irishmen see their plot foiled; at the end of the play, they are arrested for murder and

²⁶ Williams 4.

²⁷ L.S. Powell and J.C. Frank, *Conn, or Love's Victory* (Clyde, OH: A.D. Ames, 1885) 3.

placed in a prison where they will be unable to drink, plot against their enemies, or organize labor strikes – that is if the lynching posse doesn't get to them first. As is the case in many frontier melodramas, the "dangerous" ethnic characters in *Conn* are permanently prevented from wreaking further havoc on frontier communities.

Yet, Irish characters in frontier dramas were not all men; Irish women were frequently featured as feisty maids who also served as the love interest for one or more ethnic characters. Moore's *Poverty Flats: A Play of Western Life* (1899) features Dan Duffy and Biddy Houlahan as comic lovers. While much of their stage-time is shared with the Chinese character, Win Lung, Dan and Biddy appear to have more of a history than does Win Lung. Dan has traveled to Colorado from Ireland, in search of a new life and a new love. Prior to the action of the play, Dan acquired a position at "The Rising Sun" hotel and saloon. Biddy has apparently resided in Poverty Flats quite some time, having achieved the reputation of "Queen of the Camp." Like most stage Irishmen, Dan does not own property or occupy a position of real power in his community; he is merely an employee. His speech is characterized by an exaggerated dialect, peppered with plenty of "me byes" (my boys), "me darlin's" and "be heavens." Biddy, the typical Irish female, serves as the hotel's maid. She is in charge of cooking meals and constantly bickers with the Chinese character. Unlike most Irish characters, Dan and Biddy are not prone to excessive drinking.

Fergus O'Gooligan, the Irish character in *The Golden Gulch* (1893), by Charles Townsend, embodies another trait of the stage Irishman in the drama of the late nineteenth century: he is a politician – or at least he views himself as a politician. The play, which was performed in 1889 at Tony Pastor's and at Doris' Eighth Avenue Dime Museum, appears to have

been popular with the "low-brow" crowd.²⁸ Audiences would likely have enjoyed the comic characters present in the play, including O'Gooligan. It matters not that O'Gooligan was "elected" to be the Judge by a crew of men who were drinking in the saloon as they voted him into his new job. Because of his frequent appearances on stage in a drunken state, the other characters (and the audience) might wonder if O'Gooligan is the right man for the job. Yet, O'Gooligan manages to avoid any scandal resulting from his excessive drinking. He milks his role as the "elected Judge," not even trying to hide his sense of self-importance.

It is important to note that though thousands of Irish men labored on the railroad throughout the western United States, not a single Irish character in these plays has any connection at all to the railroad. Irish laborers – so present in Custis's 1828 depiction of the *B&O Rail Road* – do not appear in plays concerning railroad construction west of the Mississippi. Such an absence of Irish laborers presents an American railroad history in which Irish railroad laborers worked on urban, east-coast lines but did not contribute to the construction of the railroad in the American frontier. Thus the countless Irish laborers in the western United States, regardless of the reality of their labors, were reduced in popular entertainment at best to menial labor (maids, bartenders, etc) and more often than not presented as drunken politicians, troublemaking employees, and violently ill-tempered thugs.

The "Frontier Negro" in Popular Entertainment

With the exception of "John Henry," few, if any, songs celebrate the Black railroad worker. Even "John Henry," which tells the story of a laborer on the Chesapeake and Ohio line, does not celebrate the hundreds of Black railroad workers who labored in Wyoming and other western states and who faced challenges quite unknown to their east-coast counterparts. Instead of recognizing Black frontiersmen as railroad workers, nineteenth-century popular entertainers

²⁸ Odell, *Annals*. See Vol 14 (p 354) and Vol 15, (p 454).

presented the African-American male much as he had been presented in minstrelsy: as a dim-witted buffoon who likes the sound of his own voice and who succumbs to many of the vices held by other minority characters.

While numerous frontier-themed songs existed prior to 1900, Black characters do not seem to appear in popular frontier songs until the turn of the century. Two songs published in 1904 deal with the presence of a Black man on the frontier. "Mineola, or the Wedding of the Indian and the Coon" describes a traveling Black man who falls in love with a Native and must go to the Chief to ask for her hand in marriage. The song does not allow the "Coon" in question to be a resident of the frontier; instead he is merely touring the region, "out west upon a visit."²⁹

The Black character presented in "A Great Big Chickapoo Chief" appears to be a citizen of the western United States but is presented in a far more sinister way: "In Montana wild and wooly lived a foxy coon / He dressed up just like an Indian on a night in June."³⁰ The song goes on to describe how the Black character, dressed as an Indian, steals a chicken. The man is caught, however, thus simultaneously catching both an Indian and a Black thief. The song was published in 1904 by F.B. Haviland with an illustrated cover that hints at the sneaky nature of its Black character (see Fig. 3.1). The man on the cover exhibits a curious combination of menacing violence and comical impotence. While his mouth and eyes are not as exaggerated as some blackface characters, the man's bright red lips, especially in the circular inset, betray his minstrel lineage. His eye stares ambiguously at the viewer. His look could say, "Oops! You caught me!" But it could just as plausibly be a look of a desperate man capable of savage violence. Significantly, in both the lyrics and in the circular inset on the illustrated cover, the

²⁹ Louis Arden Schuch, "Mineola, or the Wedding of the Indian and the Coon," Online, Library of Congress, *Music for the Nation*, 6 Aug 2005.

³⁰ Edward Madden and Theodore Morse, "A Great Big Chickapoo Chief," Online, *Historic American Sheet Music*, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, 6 Aug 2005.

Black man's potential threat is dispelled, replaced with the image of a minstrel character who is exposed as an obtuse –but certainly not dangerous –nuisance.



Figure 3.1. "A Great Big Chickapoo Chief"
 Historic American Sheet Music, Music B-508,
 Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and
 Special Collection Library

Black characters in frontier plays appear to be somewhere between the two extremes of "Mineola" and "Great Big Chickapoo Chief." They are generally not criminals, as is the "Chief," but they are dim-witted. Unlike the Black man in "Mineola," they are not merely visitors in the west; they are, however, like Mineola's groom, interested in the bottle and easily convinced to do what others wish them to do. Augustin Daly's *Horizon*, George M. Baker's *Nevada, or the Lost*

Mine, and Charles Townsend's *The Golden Gulch* each contain Black characters who occupy an undesirable position in their frontier communities.

The Black character in Augustin Daly's 1871 play, *Horizon*, exists only on the periphery. He is given a name, unlike the Chinese character, who is known only as "The Heathen Chineese." But Cephas, as he is called, is similarly degraded in Daly's *dramatis personae*, which characterizes Cephas as "a Fifteenth Amendment." This tongue-in-cheek description is the first indication that Cephas is a Black man; ironically, the Fifteenth Amendment (1870), which guaranteed that Blacks have the right to vote as American citizens, is used here to lump Cephas with every other "Fifteenth Amendment." His humanity – reinforced by the Fifteenth Amendment – is again stripped away and reduced to a number. Cephas appears in the play with a number of other "darkies" who are consistently performing menial tasks. Daly's stage directions for the start of Act III indicate that "The curtain rises to a chorus of the darkies loading up." Cephas leads the chorus: "I'm proud to be in the service of the Lord, / And I'm bound to die in his army."³¹ Cephas is not seen again until Act IV, when his attempt to steal food is comically stopped by an Irish widow. Thus, Cephas – the number Fifteen – exists in *Horizon* only as a happy, musical laborer who only occasionally acts inappropriately, and even then is submissive enough to be put in his place by an Irish widow.

Jube, the Black character in Baker's *Nevada, or the Lost Mine* (1882), is granted more stage time than is Cephas. His character, however, is not used for much more than comic effect, particularly involving his antics with the Chinese servant, Win-Kye. Jube speaks in a typical minstrel dialect, with lines such as "Dat's so" and "Nebber did see sich carrin's on in de 'hole course ob my life."³² He frequently attempts to sermonize to whoever will listen, but his

³¹ Augustin Daly, *Horizon*, *American Plays*, ed. Allan Gates Halline (New York: American Book, 1935) 331, 357.

³² George M. Baker, *Nevada; or, The Lost Mine* (Boston: Walter H. Baker, 1882) 18, 25.

preaching is laden with malapropisms, i.e., "the Queen ob Shebang went wisiting ole King Solomon Isaacs." Such malapropisms effectively discredit Jube's abilities and his intelligence, turning him into a laughing stock. Jube's role in the play is on the periphery; he, like Win-Kye, is a scrap miner, picking up the pieces left behind by the white men. Marketed to amateur players, the play was performed in the late 1880s by at least two companies.³³

Nearly fifteen years after Baker's *Nevada, or the Lost Mine* was published in *The Globe Dramas*, a collection of parlor and amateur plays, a conspicuously similar script surfaced, penned by Col. George H. Hamilton and published in 1896. This play, *Sunlight; or, the Diamond King*, contained many of the same characters as *Nevada*: Win-Kye appears in *Sunlight* as Win Klee; the Irishman Silas Steele shows up as Silas Steel (minus the 'e'); and Jube becomes Jubal Jones in *Sunlight*.³⁴ Interestingly, the white characters in *Sunlight*, while based loosely on those in *Nevada*, are given new names and identities; only the Irish, Black, and Chinese characters are duplicated nearly in their entirety in Hamilton's version of the tale. Like Jube, Jubal speaks in a minstrel dialect, consistently bickers with the Chinese character, and does little to further the plot.

Senator Juniper Toots, the Blackface character in Charles Townsend's *The Golden Gulch* (1893), is described in the "Cast of Characters" as "A political 'coon.'" ³⁵ Not surprisingly, he is modeled after the minstrel character, Zip Coon, as is evidenced by the costume suggested for him: a "rather 'loud' suit. Very large collar and cuffs." It is clear that Townsend intends Toots to serve as a stock character, for in his prefatory "Remarks" he indicates that "Toots is the usual stage Negro, and there is nothing to distinguish him from others of his class except his unusually

³³ Odell, *Annals*. See vol.13 (p 576, 608).

³⁴ Geo. H. Hamilton, *Sunlight; or, The Diamond King* (Clyde, OH: Ames, 1896).

³⁵ Charles Townsend, *The Golden Gulch* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1893) 2.

pompous manner."³⁶ As is typical with the Zip Coon character, Juniper Toots' pompous behavior is shown to be unwarranted, for Toots is revealed as a drunken, dim-witted fool. He is dense even about alcohol, one of his favorite pastimes: when he drinks a particularly strong whiskey, he overreacts and assumes that he has been poisoned. "Ise killed, Ise killed! De pizen in dat bottle!" he announces to the others in the bar. Not until the bartender assures Toots there was no poison in the bottle does Toots back off his claim that he has been killed.³⁷ Toots later jumps to the conclusion that he's being killed when, after a scene full of drinking, he and the Irishman fail to notice an Indian in their midst, even though Old Magnus (the stage Savage) has been participating in the conversation. When Toots realizes Old Magnus is there, he pleads for his life and gives Magnus all the whiskey he wants. When later confronted with his actions, Toots denies giving the Indian any alcohol, invoking the Declaration of Independence in his defense:

When in de cose of human events a gemman like me, sah, wants ter took a drink sah, an' a great big red debbil comes 'round wiv knives an' swordses an' pistils an' gunses, an' says he'll blow me to glory hallelujah kingdom come an' nabs de whiskey, taint my fault.³⁸

Just as Daly's description of Cephas as "a Fifteenth Amendment" questions his humanity, Toots' slaughtering of the Declaration of Independence undercuts his dignity and suggests to the audience that the inalienable truths of that sacred document are wasted on such dim-witted creatures as Senator Juniper Toots. Despite this implication that Toots does not deserve to be treated as an American citizen, he is permitted to serve on a jury. Toots' presence on the jury, however, is allowable only because the court cannot find any other white men to serve. Toots is

³⁶ Townsend 6.

³⁷ Townsend 12.

³⁸ Townsend 24.

tolerated and used by his fellow frontiersmen when it serves their purposes, but even then he is made to know that he does not deserve his place in the community.

Despite the presence of hundreds of Black railroad workers along the rails of the western United States, these laborers do not appear in songs and plays of the American West. Rather, they are replaced with drunken, dim-witted men whose self-important claims are betrayed by malapropisms.

The "Frontier Mormon" in Popular Entertainment

Given the extreme care with which the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints has preserved the history and genealogy of its people, it is not surprising that a large number of Mormon and anti-Mormon songs have been maintained in diaries, newspapers, and other collections. For the purposes of this discussion, I have divided these songs into two categories: those written by Mormons and those written by non-Mormons (or Gentiles, as they were called by the Saints). Not surprisingly, there is a sharp difference between the tone and content of these songs.

In songs written by Mormons, the Saints are portrayed as industrious, religious, tolerant people who are blessed to live in a beautiful paradise (Utah). These songs provided an opportunity for vocalized self-expression. Songs written by Mormons in the Utah territory were often published in one or more of the local newspapers; some were also published in an 1871 book called, *Sacred Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. Because of the availability of these song lyrics in newspapers and in a hymnbook, it is certainly possible that these songs were sung publicly by Mormons, in Sunday worship services and/or in a community gathering. "Come, Come Ye Saints" (1871) describes the spirit with which the Mormons traveled to Utah:

Why should we mourn, or think our lot is hard?
'Tis not so; all is right!

.....
Gird up your loins, fresh courage take,
Our God will never us forsake.³⁹

Once in the West, Mormon songwriters praised the grand mission of setting up God's Kingdom in Utah: "Escape unto fair Zion's land, and thus fulfill the Lord's command, / And help to build up Zion, before the Lord appear."⁴⁰ "The Merry Mormons," written by Matthew Rowan in the early 1870s, captures the work ethic, attitudes, and contentment that Mormons felt characterized their community:

What peace and joy pervade the soul
And sweet sensations thro' me roll,
And love and peace my heart console,
Since first I met the Mormons.
Hey the merry,
O the busy,
Hey the sturdy Mormons;
I never knew what joy was
Till I became a Mormon.⁴¹

The industriousness of the Mormons is further praised in such songs as "In 1864" and "In the Hive of Deseret."⁴²

A few Mormon songs describe the work ethic with which Mormons labored on the railroad. "Echo Canyon," written during the 1868 construction efforts, extols Mormon labor:

Our camp is united, we all labor hard,
And if we work faithfully, we'll get our reward;
.....
The boys in our camp are light-hearted and gay,
We work on the railroad ten hours a day.⁴³

³⁹ William Clayton and J.T. White, "Come, Come, Ye Saints," *Songs of the American West* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1968) 181-182.

⁴⁰ William Willes, "There Is a People in the West," *Songs of the American West*, 183.

⁴¹ Matthew Rowan, "The Merry Mormons," *Songs of the American West*, 243.

⁴² *Songs of the American West*, 192, 204.

⁴³ "Echo Canyon," *Songs of the American West*, 74-75.

"The Iron Horse," also written in 1868, describes in detail the many benefits made possible by Mormon efforts on the railroad, including faster trips to the Lake, newer fashions, and reunions with distant family and friends. This song, though, also describes the Mormon railroad effort as part of its larger mission to convert new Saints and to maintain a holy land in Utah. The writer addresses the Iron Horse:

So, make haste, fearless steed,
Make us all one in creed:
We seek to form acquaintance,
And bring people to repentance.
Then, hurrah! come along'
Thro' these high mountains throng:
May th' Iron Horse and Mormons
Always right every wrong.⁴⁴

Clearly, the author of this song sought to align himself and his church with the railroad. He speaks of the Iron Horse with pride, and assumes that it will be a benefit to Mormonism, and, by extension, to the world. Thus, songs written by Mormons stressed the industriousness, holiness, and past sufferings of the religious sect.

Songs written by non-Mormons emphasized different themes: polygamy, fanaticism, and violence. A popular topic among anti-Mormon songs is the Mountain Meadow Massacre of 1857, in which Mormon men slaughtered 120 emigrants heading west on a wagon train. Some reports claim that several Native Americans were convinced by the Mormons to attack the wagon train so that the Mormons could step in and arrange a truce; once the emigrants had disarmed themselves and waived a white flag (per the conditions of the truce), the Mormons opened fire and killed all but a few children. Other reports claim that no Native Americans were involved at all; instead, according to several diary entries, a few of the Mormon men dressed as

⁴⁴ "The Iron Horse," *Songs of the American West*, 72-73.

Indians, painting their faces red and donning traditional tribal attire. Regardless of which version of the attack really happened, news of the massacre reached every corner of the nation and prompted great fear among westward pioneers. Such panic was perpetuated by popular songs depicting the event. "The Mountain Meadows Massacre" (c. 1875) typifies the widely accepted version of the attack. The third verse of the song reveals the Native American attackers as costumed Mormons:

It was in Indian garb and colors
Those bloody hounds were seen
To flock around that little train
All on the meadows green.

Verses five through seven describe the method through which the Mormons convinced the emigrants to surrender:

Till Lee, the Captain of the band,
This word to them he gave,
Saying, "If you will give up your arms,
We surely will let you live."
With this request they did comply,
Thinking their lives to save;
.....
When once their arms they did give up
And started for Cedar City,
They rushed on them, Indian style:
Oh! what a human pity.

The tenth verse of the song depicts the most widely disputed claim of all:

It was by orders of the President
This bloody deed was done,
The leader of the Mormon Church,
Whose name is Brigham Young.⁴⁵

While it has never been proved that Brigham Young commissioned the attack, many pioneers believed that the Mormon President did, in fact, order the slaughter. By linking the attack to the Church as a whole, this song serves to warn Americans that no Mormon can be trusted, that all

⁴⁵ "The Mountain Meadows Massacre," *Songs of the American West*, 234-235.

Mormons are violent, and that the Mormon Church believes it is above the laws of the United States.

Violence and lawlessness are themes in a series of "battle songs" written by both Mormons and anti-Mormons during the years following the Mountain Meadow Massacre, during which the United States army was sent to control the Mormons in Utah. These songs often have striking similarities, despite the vastly different positions held by the Mormon and anti-Mormon camps, for both sides speak with rhetoric of complete annihilation. In "All Are Talking of Utah," the Mormon songwriter conveys confidence in his church and its position of power in Utah. The song first alludes to the nationwide attention Utah was receiving at the time.

'Tis Utah and the Mormons in Congress, pulpit, press.
'Tis Utah and the Mormons in every place, I guess.
We must be growing greater: we can't be growing less;
For all are talking of Utah.

Next, though, the songwriter reveals the larger question at stake: who will maintain control of Utah: "They say they'll send an army to set the Mormons right," the song says. But it goes on to voice Mormon solidarity and to warn the United States army that Mormons will not give up Utah without a fight:

We bees are nearly filling the hive of Deseret.
If hurt, we'll sting together, and gather all we get;
For all are talking of Utah.⁴⁶

A similarly threatening tone is taken in the anti-Mormon song, "The Mormon King." Irish vocalist G.W. Anderson is credited with the lyrics, which tell the Mormons in no uncertain terms that they will be held to the law of the United States. He begins by introducing the Mormon's warning for the army to stay away:

He [Brigham Young] says we'll rue the day
That e'er we came into his way,

⁴⁶ "All Are Talking of Utah," *Songs of the American West*, 233.

For all of us he'll surely slay
Out in Salt Lake City.

Next, Anderson pokes fun at Brigham's belief that his warning would have any credence with Americans:

Poor Brigham's mind, it can't be right,
Or else he's surely lost his sight,
To think he'd a Yankee 'fright
Away from Salt Lake City.

He goes on to articulate a threat of his own:

Old Brigham mustn't think we are fools,
To be knocked about like wooden stools,
But we will let him know our rules,
Out in Salt Lake City.
If any fuss he goes to make,
The whole of his city we will take,
And then fasten him unto a stake
Out in Salt Lake City.⁴⁷

Anderson ends his song with a promise that Salt Lake City and the rest of Utah will live by the laws of the United States of America. Both the pro-Mormon "All Are Talking of Utah" and the anti-Mormon "The Mormon King" contain extremist rhetoric and unveiled threats.

Ultimately, despite Mormon efforts to represent themselves in songs that highlight their industry and righteousness, popular opinions toward Mormonism were more heavily influenced by the songs and images put forth by non-Mormons. Many anti-Mormon songs and illustrations also emphasized the Mormon practice of polygamy. According to Megan Sanborn Jones, fascination with polygamy was fueled by non-Mormon men's sexual desires:

The characterization of Mormon men – their unchecked sexual desires, their devaluation of motherhood (the major calling of a wife), and their practice of converting wives away from their families – establishes a darkly attractive male fantasy world even more abhorrent for its appeal. Demonizing the Mormon man

⁴⁷ G.W. Anderson, "The Mormon King," *Songs of the American West*, 214-215.

allowed popular culture to explore the possibility of sexual transgression, while reaffirming the opposing characteristics of American Manhood.⁴⁸

"Wish I Was a Mormonite" (1863), "The Mormon King," and "In the Midst of These Awful Mormons" (1872) all refer to the tradition of multiple wives. Alfred Norton's "Mormon Love Serenade" offers a tongue-in-cheek wedding proposal that pokes fun at the irrationality of polygamy:

Say, Susan, wilt thou come with me,
In sweet community to live?
Of heart and hand and home to thee,
A sixteenth part I'll freely give,
Of all the love that swells my breast,
Of all the honor of my name,
Of worldly wealth by me possessed,
A sixteenth portion thou shalt claim.⁴⁹

In addition to poking fun at polygamy, this song implies that only a foolish, dense woman would ever agree to enter into marriage with a Mormon man.

While some songs do criticize women for sharing their husbands, many more songs and illustrations suggested that the women were really no more than slaves to their husbands, with little choice in the matter. A political cartoon published in January, 1882, (see Fig. 3.2) clearly illustrates the prevailing belief that polygamy was little different from slavery.

Significantly, polygamy is used to discredit Mormons in one of the only songs written by a non-Mormon that directly refers to a Mormon railroad employee. S.L. Samson's "Bishop Zack, the Mormon Engineer" describes the life of an engineer on the Denver and Rio Grande line during the last years of the nineteenth century. Rather than depicting the work that he and his fellow Mormons did to maintain the rails and cars, the song instead describes Zack's lust for his many wives: "Zack he had a wife in ev'ry railroad town," the song boasts, "And when he'd pass

⁴⁸ Jones 166-167.

⁴⁹ Alfred Norton, "Mormon Love Serenade," *Songs of the American West*, 217.

each wifie's home his whistle blew."⁵⁰ Zack does not have a song written about him because he is an engineer; instead Zack finds himself the subject of a song because he is a polygamist. He could just have easily been "Zack, the Mormon Farmer," or "Zack, the Mormon Merchant." Zack is not notable for his labor or for his contribution to the community; he is reduced to his sexual and marital practices.

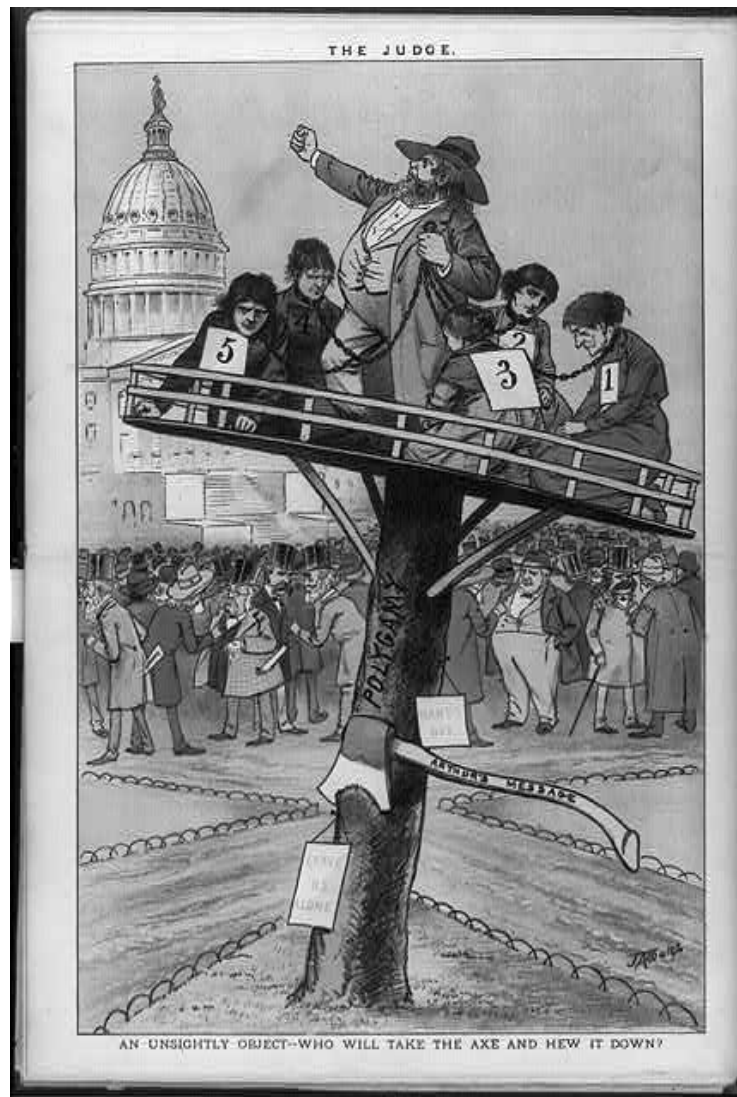


Figure 3.2. "An Unsightly Object"
Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints
Division

⁵⁰ S.L. Samson, "Bishop Zack, the Mormon Engineer," *Songs of the American West*, 76.

Mormons were also presented as violent polygamists in several nineteenth-century melodramas, including Joaquin Miller's *The Danites in the Sierras* (1876), Jack Crawford's *Fonda*, and Moore's *Poverty Flats* (1899). While *Poverty Flats* does not include a Mormon character, I include it in this discussion because it contains an off-handed joke about Mormons, as do a number of other frontier melodramas. In a scene in this play, the Irishman teases the Judge, who has just announced he is in love. To end Dan's mockery the Judge is forced to repeat his announcement:

JUDGE. As I said before, I am in love.

DAN. That's twice you are in love. Ye'll be in trouble if ye keep on.

Your place is in Utah, not "Poverty Flats."⁵¹

While most off-handed anti-Mormon comments in nineteenth-century drama involved the practice of polygamy, *Fonda* and *The Danites in the Sierras* address the topic of Mormon lawlessness and violence. Roger Hall observes, "Mormon plays mirrored the almost universal hostility to the new religious sect that deviated from established moral rules. They latched on to events such as the Utah War and the Mountain Meadows Massacre."⁵² The plot of *Fonda; or, the Trapper's Daughter* clearly finds its basis in the Aiken Massacre, which took place north of Salt Lake City in the mid 1860s. In the play, a wagon train en route to California is surrounded by a group of Mormons who want to kill the men so they can confiscate the women and supplies from the wagons. Unlike the real Massacre, however, most of the men and women in the play survive the attack and make it to California. Thus, *Fonda* serves two purposes: first, it associates Mormons with violence; second, it reassures the audience that the Mormons can be controlled.

A similar theme is found in Miller's *The Danites*. This play tells the story of a young girl, Nancy Williams, whose family had been killed by the Danites. The Danites were a group of

⁵¹ Bernard Francis Moore, *Poverty Flats* (Boston: Baker, 1899) 9.

⁵² Hall 228.

Mormon men, sworn to secrecy, who were reportedly ordered by the Mormon Prophet to commit violent acts in retaliation for what the Church saw as wrongdoings against it. The Danites were reportedly honor-bound to kill whomever Brigham Young wished to have dead; the men were specifically commissioned to murder any man, woman, or child who was remotely related to the men who killed Joseph Smith in his jail cell near Nauvoo, Illinois. In Miller's play, a young miner named Sandy witnessed the brutal killing of the Williams family, and believes that Nancy, too, had been killed. As it turns out, though, Nancy survived the attack and has assumed the identity of a young boy (Billy) in an attempt to hide from the vengeful Danites. Over the course of the play, the Danites hunt down Nancy/Billy, determined to kill every last blood relative of the men who killed Joseph Smith.

In Act II of *The Danites*, two Danites, including the historical figure Bill Hickman, discuss their orders to kill a young girl whose father was involved in Smith's murder. After Hickman's companion suggests they should not go through with the killing, Hickman responds with passion:

HICKMAN. Have we not our orders from the Church? Is she not sentenced to death? Do we not hold our commission from Brigham Young for her execution?

CARTER. But I – I'm tired of this hunting down helpless women. As long as it was men I did my part, but now – well, she had no hand in the Prophet's death.

HICKMAN. But her father had. And are *you* to sit in judgment now on this? You are not the judge. You are only the executioner. No! She and all her kindred shall perish from the earth. For I will be revenged, saith the Lord, unto the third and fourth generation.

Hickman goes on to promise Carter that if he betrays the Danite promise, Hickman will kill him with his own knife. The Danites attempt to kill Nancy/Billy, but are ultimately caught and hanged. Sandy and Nancy agree to marry, with the obvious implication that Nancy's blood (and

thus the blood of one of Joseph Smith's murderers) will be carried on to the next generation.

Like *Fonda*, *The Danites* establishes little doubt that the Danites are violent men who are under orders from the Mormon Church. By extension, these plays suggest that the Mormon Church itself is violent and cannot be trusted. After establishing this threat, however, both plays reassure their audiences that the Danites will not prevail. The law of the United States – not the law of Brigham Young – will win in the end.

Mormon men are portrayed as violent men who are unable to question the extremist orders given them by the church hierarchy. Mormon women are portrayed as weak creatures who are easily manipulated by men and who are unable (or unwilling) to expect for themselves a traditional marriage. By representing Mormons as polygamous followers of an innately violent and vengeful religion, many nineteenth-century songs, illustrations, and plays established "The Mormon" character as an irrational fanatic who cannot think for him/herself and who cannot be trusted. While some aspects of this portrayal were, indeed, based on fact (i.e., polygamy was an accepted principle of the Mormon Church until the late nineteenth century), the representation of "The Mormon" created in nineteenth-century popular entertainment certainly did not present the whole story. Such entertainments focused on the negatives of Mormonism and on the Otherness of its practices rather than on the many valuable contributions that Mormons made to their communities and to the United States as a whole. Thus, despite the fact that both the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines in Utah were built by 5,000 Mormon men, Mormon railroad laborers are reduced in popular entertainment to the unique and frequently misunderstood characteristics of their religion.

The "Frontier Chinaman" in Popular Entertainment

Of the frontier stage types considered in this study, the Frontier Chinaman is perhaps the hardest to uncover, document, and analyze; to date, there are fewer than twenty extant frontier melodrama scripts with at least one Chinese character. Songs and illustrations with Chinese characters have been preserved with somewhat more frequency, facilitated by research projects associated with the Chinese Historical Society of America and several other nineteenth-century sheet music repositories. It is ultimately impossible to know how many plays and songs with Chinese characters were performed in the nineteenth century. While performances of plays such as Harte and Twain's *Ah Sin*, Miller's *The Danites*, and Bartley Campbell's *My Partner* are well documented in New York newspapers, it is less certain if these plays received much stage time in other parts of the country. In the case of lesser-known plays with Chinese characters (i.e., *Nevada*, *Poverty Flats*, and *The Golden Gulch*), it is even more difficult to ascertain where (or whether!) these scripts were performed. Still more songs and plays seem to have been performed in the nineteenth century but were either never published or not preserved. Dave Williams suggests that many vaudeville acts and farces containing Chinese characters may not have had a formal script, thus resulting in no archival documentation of the plot or characters. He goes on to posit that a natural disaster may have further reduced the number of extant scripts: "San Francisco was a center for both the Chinese and those who observed them; it is quite possible that the 1906 earthquake and fire may have obliterated some scripts containing intriguing images of the Chinese."⁵³

As is the case with the Frontier Irishman and the Frontier Negro, the Frontier Chinaman exists primarily for comic effects; however, the Frontier Chinaman differs from his Irish and Black counterparts in a significant way. While Irish and Black individuals could be observed in

⁵³ Williams, *Misreading* 5.

daily life in virtually every region of the country, Chinese were, in the "frontier era," primarily located in California and in other western territories; indeed, 99.4 percent of all Chinese living in the United States lived in the west.⁵⁴ Thus the Frontier Chinaman also exists to help "set the scene." A play with a Chinaman is almost certainly a play that takes place in the west. In his pioneering study, *Ah Sin and His Brethren in American Literature*, William Purviance Fenn observes the use of Chinese characters within the larger trend of local color:

The existence of a large number of this alien race offered an unusual opportunity for devotees of the local-color movement. . . . They were strange and enigmatical; their appearance and ways added color to already too colorful backgrounds, and the difficulty of understanding them piqued the curiosity of American readers. The result was a body of fiction, drama, and verse exploiting the Chinese as a rich source of local color.⁵⁵

One of the most famous of all local-color authors, Bret Harte was influential in the creation of the Frontier Chinaman. His poem "Plain Language From Truthful James," alternately called "The Heathen Chinee," introduces the character of Ah Sin, who would later appear in plays, songs, and print. The poem's narrator describes a game of cards between himself, his friend Bill Nye, and Ah Sin. Ah Sin has cheated throughout the game, with cards up his sleeve. While the narrator observes that Bill Nye had plenty of cards stuffed up his own sleeve, the public embraced the parts of the poem that emphasized the oddity of the Chinaman. After describing Ah Sin as "childlike" and deceptive, the narrator concludes:

Which is why I remark,
And my language is plain,
That for ways that are dark
And for tricks that are vain,
The heathen Chinee is peculiar.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Chang 93.

⁵⁵ William Purviance Fenn, *Ah Sin and His Brethren in American Literature* (Peking: College of Chinese Studies, 1933).

⁵⁶ Bret Harte, "Plain Language From Truthful James," Chicago, 1870.

Though most scholars agree that Harte intended his 1870 poem to be a critique of anti-Chinese prejudices among Irish laborers, it is clear that the poem and its central character (Ah Sin) were ultimately used not to satirize the Workingman's Party but rather to ridicule and demean Chinese laborers in the United States.⁵⁷ Takaki notes that the poem's enormous success and influence upon subsequent musical and dramatic works was due in part to the timing of the poem's publication. He points out that the poem was introduced to the American public at roughly the same time that Chinese laborers were filtering into Massachusetts and other areas of the country; the poem's release coincided with a burgeoning national awareness of the "Chinese problem."⁵⁸ Significantly, the vast majority of songs and plays containing Chinese characters were published and/or performed *after* the publication of Harte's poem. Many of the first Chinese characters were, in fact, named after Harte's poem; the Chinese character in Daly's *Horizon* is called "The Heathen Chineese," a direct reference to "Plain Language." Harte and Mark Twain later used the Chinaman of Harte's poem as a central figure in their 1876 play, *Ah Sin*.

Between 1870 and 1900, Chinese characters were featured in dozens of minstrel and vaudeville songs. Music historian Krystyn Moon notes that some of these songs used music from blackface minstrelsy, with new lyrics that featured pidgin English and silly Chinamen. In these songs, which were likely performed in variety theatres, the singers took on the role of "Ah Sin" or "John Chinaman," embodying a white man's interpretation of what it meant to be Chinese and, ultimately, what it takes to be "American." Not surprisingly, these songs do not mention the accomplishments of Chinese laborers, including the recent completion of the transcontinental railroad; rather the songs exaggerate characteristics that were widely believed to be held by all

⁵⁷ Gary Scharnhorst, "'Ways That Are Dark': Appropriations of Bret Harte's 'Plain Language' From Truthful James," *19th Century Literature* 51:3 (1996): 380.

⁵⁸ Takaki, *Iron Cages* 223.

Chinese: smoking opium, speaking pidgin, eating rodents, and thwarting the labor movement by offering cheap labor.

George Cooper's "The Jolly Chinaman" (1882), features a Chinese narrator who proudly boasts of a vice for which the Frontier Chinaman is frequently known: smoking opium.⁵⁹ While it is true that many Chinese immigrants did smoke opium, nineteenth-century entertainers failed to point out a great irony: Dave Williams observes that "Euroamericans attacked Chinese opium use as if it were originally a Chinese habit; almost no one mentioned the West's responsibility for introducing it into China in the first place."⁶⁰ Cooper's song, of course, fails to acknowledge this fact.

An 1879 song entitled "What! Never?" pokes fun at the Frontier Chinaman's vices while simultaneously proving him a liar. Reminiscent of a comical technique employed by Gilbert and Sullivan, "What! Never?" employs both a bragging soloist and a chorus whose interjections prove the soloist to be quite laughable. In this song, the Chinese narrator promises that he does not do any of the things that white men (specifically Irish) have accused him of doing:

I am a nicee little chinee-man
Which nobody can deny
Never stealee, never fight, never gettee much tight
And I never tell a lie.
.....
I dlinkee plentee tea butee no whisikee
Cause whisikee notee veelee nice
I eatee cow cow and I eatee chow chow
But I never eatee lats and mice.

⁵⁹ George Cooper, "The Jolly Chinaman" (Philadelphia: Lee & Walker, 1882).

⁶⁰ Williams, *Misreading* 92.

After the Chinaman has presented himself as a fine, upstanding member of the community, a white chorus interjects, questioning his statement about rats and mice. "What! Never?" they ask. The Chinese character responds, "Welee, seldom." Thus, with comic effect, the songwriter has proven the Chinese character to be guilty of all things of which he claims to be innocent. Further, the songwriter establishes that the Chinaman cannot be trusted. Ultimately, though, the writer's use of a white chorus assures listeners that the Chinaman is not to be feared. All one must do is ask, "What! Never?" and the Chinese man will back down from his claims. "What! Never?" succeeds in presenting a Chinese character full of flaws and easily intimidated.

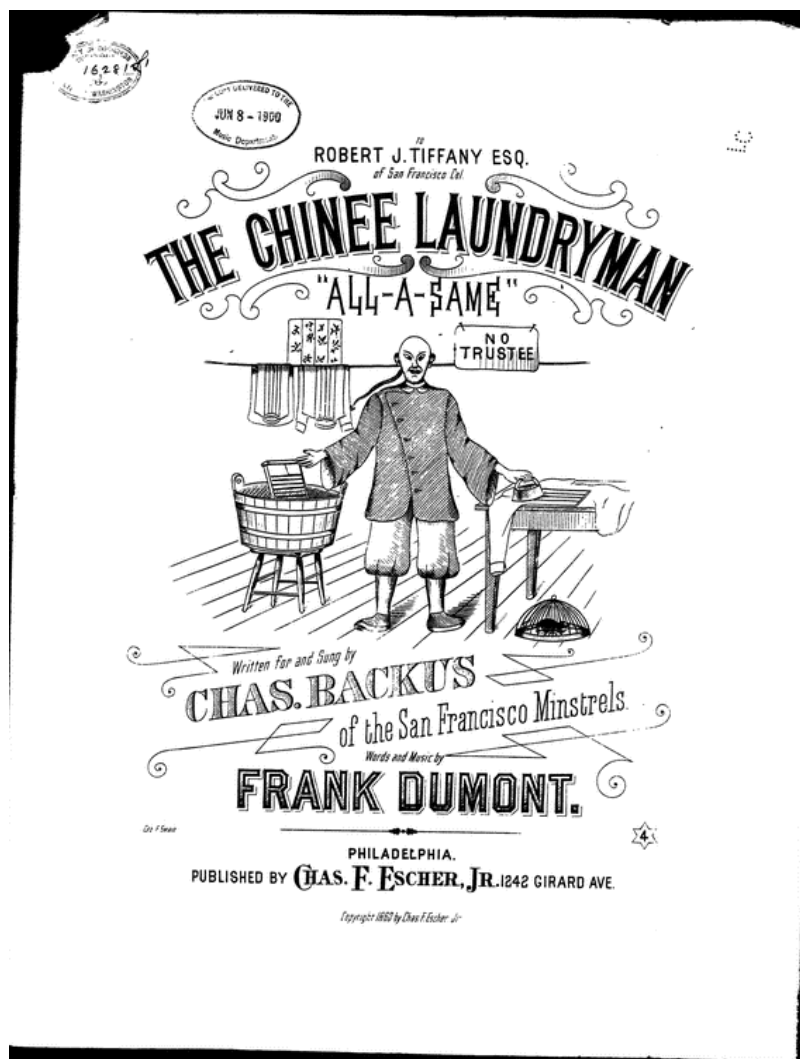


Figure 3.3. "All-A-Same, or The Chinee Laundryman" Library of Congress. Music Division.

Frank Dumont's "All-A-Same, or The Chinee Laundryman," written for and sung by Charles Backus of the San Francisco Minstrels, features a common subset of the Frontier Chinaman: the laundryman, or the "Washee Washee" character. In this song, the laundryman sings in pidgin about his daily routines:

Me no can talkee much english [sic]
Me speakee you de best I can
Me workee all day in laundry
For ching ching dat's his name,
Me catchee de rats in de market
Makee pot-pie all a same.⁶¹

As is the case in other songs featuring Chinese characters, "The Chinee Laundryman" does not speak highly of the Chinese character's work ethic; rather the song highlights exaggerated vices. The cover to the sheet music for this song offers a unique insight into how this song might have appeared on the stage as performed by the San Francisco Minstrels (see Fig. 3.3). There is only one known photograph of an actor dressed as a Stage Chinaman; the photo is of Charles Parsloe and reveals that Parsloe's Chinaman was primarily signified by an exaggerated queue and the traditional baggy dress of a Chinese laborer. The laundryman on the cover of Dumont's song closely resembles the Chinaman captured in the photograph of Parsloe. Because of the similarities between the portrait of the actor and the cover sketch of the minstrel character, it is probable that Stage Chinamen in theatre, in song, and in vaudeville wore nearly identical attire. Dumont's laundryman wears a costume consisting of a dark shirt and loose pants gathered almost like a skirt; his head is shaved, except for the long braid (queue) down his back; he wears slippers, and his eyes and eyebrows appear to be exaggerated in their slant. In addition, the cover illustration includes a prominent sign written in English: "No Trustee." Beneath the ironing table, the laundryman keeps a rat under a cage, presumably for his next meal.

⁶¹ Frank Dumont, "All-A-Same, or The Chinee Laundryman," *Music for the Nation*, Online, Library of Congress 29 Nov. 2001.

While it is true that by 1900 25% of Chinese laborers were employed in a laundry, the percentage of Chinese laundryman was much lower at the time of the song's publication in 1880.⁶² Still, Dumont and his colleagues chose to write songs about Chinese servants, hoodlums, and laundrymen rather than about Chinese railroad laborers, farmers, and merchants. It might be argued that writers chose to feature laundrymen and hoodlums rather than farmers and merchants because these characters were funnier; yet it seems more likely that songwriters focused on such characters because to sing about a Chinese railroad laborer would not seem "different" enough. A Chinese man working on a railroad in the middle of nowhere does not offer the same quality posed by a Chinese laundryman who works down the street. It is the "alien in our midst" quality for which Dumont and others were striving. Music historian Krystyn Moon argues that in making such choices, songwriters were participating in a larger debate of national identity:

Songs written about the Chinese, first written in California and then produced and performed elsewhere, were one of the many strands that delineated national identity during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Performers and songwriters, consciously or otherwise, helped circulate particular ideas about the Chinese as an inassimilable, inferior race. These songs and performances justified discriminatory practices in legislation and daily interaction.⁶³

Given that many of the plays and songs with Frontier Chinamen were written during the years between the completion of the transcontinental line (1869) and the passage of the first Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), it seems likely that such popular entertainments reflected, codified, and perpetuated contemporary opinions regarding the presence of Chinese laborers in America.⁶⁴

That these plays and songs were performed by white men dressed as Chinese men further establishes that the definition of "Chinaman" put forth in popular entertainment was one envisioned by white America. Daly's *Horizon*, Harte and Twain's *Ah Sin*, Miller's *The Danites*,

⁶² Takaki, *Different* 202.

⁶³ Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s – 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2005) 32.

⁶⁴ Fourteen plays with Frontier Chinamen were performed or published between 1869 and 1882.

and Campbell's *My Partner* offer a unique opportunity to analyze Chinese characters in plays that were performed with enough frequency to merit critical response in the New York newspapers. As such, we have record not only of the audiences' response but also of the critic's description of the actors' performances.

White actors who acted Chinese roles were engaging in a practice similar to blackface, in which white actors rubbed burnt cork on their skin to simulate black skin. Because Chinese impersonators also "put on" signifying ethnic characteristics, twentieth-century scholars dubbed the practice "yellowface." Yellowface techniques created onstage personas that were quite similar to illustrations of the Chinese in political cartoons and magazine covers.⁶⁵ We can infer from these illustrations and from play reviews, as well as the one extant photograph of an actor dressed as a Stage Chinaman, that yellowface included both physical and verbal signifiers, including makeup, posture, bald wigs with a queue, dialect, and *lazzi* (i.e., clumsiness) that would have been specific to the Chinaman character.

Of the several actors who played Chinamen during their careers, Charles Parsloe was undoubtedly the most famous and the most widely documented. Parsloe originated the Chinese character in Bret Harte's *Two Men of Sandy Bar* and was also engaged as the Chinaman in Harte and Twain's *Ah Sin*. After the premiere of *Ah Sin* in 1876, Parsloe worked almost exclusively as a Chinese impersonator, taking on the roles of Washee Washee in *The Danites* and, perhaps his most popular role, Wing Lee in *My Partner*, for which he is said to have earned more than \$100,000 over 1300 performances.⁶⁶ In some cases, specifically in *Two Men of Sandy Bar* and *Ah Sin*, Parsloe's performance was cited by critics as the best thing about an otherwise dull production. In a recent article on Parsloe, Sean Metzger offers an explanation for why Chinese

⁶⁵ Moon 6.

⁶⁶ Sean Metzger, "Charles Parsloe's Chinese Fetish: An Example of Yellowface Performance in Nineteenth-Century American Melodrama," *Theatre Journal* 56.4 (2004): 628.

characters and impersonators were so popular: "Parsloe animates the Chinaman as a fetish that substitutes for and conceals the dominant anxieties about Chinese immigrants among the white majority in the late 1800s."⁶⁷ Indeed, Chinese characters in frontier melodramas are similar to the characters put forth in songs about Chinese: they are exaggerated caricatures which emphasize negative traits and present them in such a way that they can be laughed at rather than feared.

Augustin Daly, one of the most prominent figures in American theatre history, created one of the first onstage Chinamen in his 1871 play, *Horizon*. The Chinese character is listed in the *dramatis personae* only as "The Heathen Chinee," and other characters also refer to him as the "Heathen" or the "Chinee" who "works for half-pay" and "steals the bread out of honest men's mouths."⁶⁸ Thus, the white characters in the play position the Chinese man in an antagonistic relationship with "honest" American men. Clearly, Daly and his characters place blame for poverty and labor problems on the shoulders of the Chinese laborer. Daly further removes any white responsibility for the "Chinese problem" by adding a phrase after the Chinese character's name in the *dramatis personae*: "The Heathen Chinee, *who does not understand*" (emphasis mine). Given that the Chinese character speaks in exaggerated pidgin English, it is not hard for the audience to believe that the Chinaman "does not understand." In addition, Daly has blamed the Chinese character for the obvious lack of communication that occurs between "The Heathen Chinee" and the other characters on stage, as well as for the communication problem that exists between white Americans and Chinese laborers in general. The Chinese character in *Horizon* is laughable; he cheats, he steals, he can't even speak English. The audience, though, has no reason to fear "The Heathen Chinee," for he "does not understand";

⁶⁷ Metzger 628.

⁶⁸ Daly, *Horizon* 349.

because the audience *does* understand, they sit in a position of power and authority over the Chinese character and, by extension, all Chinese in America.

The Chinese character in *The Danites in the Sierras* does not differ much from the Heathen Chinese presented in *Horizon*; Washee Washee is, like The Heathen Chinese, called a liar and a thief. The audience, in fact, observes Washee Washee stuffing stolen clothes into his shirt. Unlike the character in *Horizon*, however, Washee Washee becomes violent when the white men around him catch him red-handed. He pulls a gun on the men, apparently threatening to shoot the men unless they allow him to escape. The "threat" is quickly diffused, however, when the white men easily get the gun away from Washee Washee; they throw a noose around his neck, ready to kill him now and sentence him to death in a court later.⁶⁹ Once more, the Chinese character has been presented as possessing potentially dangerous traits that are ultimately no threat to civilized Americans because the Chinese man is not smart enough, strong enough, or brave enough to successfully challenge white men.

The images of Chinese men in *Ah Sin* and *My Partner* are more complex, though they, too, contain exaggerated caricatures of Chinese vices. However, they also place the Chinese character in a role that is central to the plot. Indeed, in both plays the Chinese characters serve as *deus ex machina*, bringing about the resolution of the story through their actions and observations. *Ah Sin*, written and performed in 1876, is unique among plays with Chinese characters in that Ah Sin is the title character. Despite his prominent position within the plot, though, Ah Sin is not necessarily portrayed in a positive light, nor is he given the kind of background history that is given to other minority characters who share their names with the titles of the plays in which they exist (i.e., *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Metamora*). Instead, Ah Sin comes across as little more than the typical Frontier Chinaman. His troublemaking trickery

⁶⁹ Miller 388.

shines through as he fixes a card game between two miners; his thievery is made clear when he steals a young woman's handkerchief; and his deceptiveness is firmly established when he hangs on to a bloody jacket after he was paid good money to get rid of it.

Beyond Ah Sin's own behavior, he is defined and characterized by other people in the story. Mrs. Tempest emphasizes Ah Sin's lack of intelligence, calling him a "poor afflicted creature" whose "dried faculties" rattle whenever he shakes his head. The Chinaman is also spoken of in terms of disease: the villain refers to him as a "moral cancer," an "unsolvable political problem," and a "slant-eyed son of the yellow jaunders."⁷⁰ Primarily, though, other characters speak of Ah Sin as though he is nothing more than an animal. Mrs. Tempest clearly articulates her opinion of Ah Sin's humanity (or lack thereof) when she observes him drop a dish while trying to set the table for dinner: "Poor dumb animal," she says, "with his tail on top of his head instead of where it ought to be."⁷¹ By linking Ah Sin's queue to an animal's tail, Mrs. Tempest is both making fun of the Chinese immigrant's appearance and his supposed animalistic heathenness.

Twentieth-century critics have theorized that Ah Sin was significantly different from other Frontier Chinamen. Dave Williams argues that *Ah Sin* marks a significant deviation from other Chinese characters in that he is central to the plot and his name serves as the title of the play. As evidence for his belief that Ah Sin has more power than other nineteenth-century Chinamen, Williams offers an analysis of the card game in which Ah Sin pulls the strings by switching the players' cards while they are out of the room:

When the two miners resume their game, Ah Sin provides a running commentary, points out that both men lie in disparaging their respective hands, and celebrates Plunkett's victory with a silent dance. He is therefore in complete control of the

⁷⁰ Bret Harte and Mark Twain, *Ah Sin, The Chinese Other: An Anthology of Plays* (Lanham: UP of America, 1997) 45-46.

⁷¹ Harte and Twain 72.

scene in two senses. Both Broderick and Plunkett remain ignorant of his manipulation, but their actions follow his determination. Moreover, Ah Sin mediates between the gamblers and the audience.⁷²

I agree with Williams that this scene is "controlled" by Ah Sin; yet I would maintain that Harte and Twain have not given Ah Sin this opportunity to "control" the scene in order to empower him or his Chinese brethren. Rather, the poker game exists primarily so that Plunkett can win Broderick's claim; without this development, the plot would not exist. While it is true that the playwrights chose to accomplish this plot development through an act of trickery on the part of a Chinese character, it is more likely that Harte and Twain saw the game as an opportunity for comic relief. The Chinese character, after all, was praised by critics as the only good thing about the play. Having heard similar observations regarding the Chinese character in *Two Men of Sandy Bar*, Harte would have likely been seeking out every conceivable opportunity to display his comic Chinaman in *Ah Sin*. Because Ah Sin exists primarily for comic effect, and because several other Chinese characters serve similar roles in plot-development, I would argue that Ah Sin is not that much different from other Chinese characters; he simply receives more stage time.

There is, however, one incident in which it could be argued that Harte and Twain endow Ah Sin with a greater degree of manhood than has been seen in other Frontier Chinamen. After observing Broderick throw a man violently over a cliff, Ah Sin manages to retain a piece of crucial evidence – Broderick's bloody jacket. Later, Broderick pays Ah Sin \$500 to make it look like another man's jacket; the two men shake hands to seal the deal. However, Harte and Twain clearly indicate in their stage directions that Ah Sin "surreptitiously wipes his hand on blouse, with the faintest perceptible show of disgust, which Broderick does not see."⁷³ In this simple interaction between Broderick and Ah Sin, the playwrights have given the Chinese character an

⁷² Williams, *Misreading* 111.

⁷³ Harte and Twain 70.

opportunity to display that he has a conscience. Ah Sin is permitted to "judge" the villain. By wiping his hand disgustedly after shaking Broderick's hand, Ah Sin expresses the very opinion that the audience would have been thinking at that moment: that Broderick is a slimy, dirty man who deserves to be stopped. Indeed, Ah Sin ultimately stops Broderick by holding on to the bloody jacket and producing it in time to clear an honest man's name and to prove once and for all that Broderick masterminded the crime. Thus, while Ah Sin's significant stage time and his centrality to the plot could be explained by the playwright's desire to foreground the comic strength of the play, Ah Sin's handshake with Broderick reveals the real distinction granted this Chinese character: he is given a conscience that is ultimately aligned with the audiences'.

Wing Lee, in Campbell's popular *My Partner* (1879) also poses an interesting paradox in which the playwright has primarily endowed the Chinese character with typically negative vices while simultaneously suggesting that Wing Lee is more than just a silly Chinaman. As is the case in *Ah Sin*, Wing Lee is central to the plot in that his position as the town's laundryman puts him in a position to hold the key (part of a bloody shirt) to solving the mystery of the play and freeing an innocent man. He is also, like Ah Sin, a comic character who exists primarily to garner laughs from the audience and to play up the talents of star-performer, Charles Parsloe. In fact, the *New York Times* review of the play's premiere indicates that, like *Ah Sin*, *My Partner* was written especially for Charles Parsloe:

It is understood that the play was written for Mr. Louis Aldrich and Mr. C.T. Parsloe. The former, as Joe Saunders, acted with a great deal of force, pathos, and tenderness; while the latter's Wing Lee was a very striking imitation of the imported Chinaman.⁷⁴

Parsloe was given much fodder with which to create his traditional yellowface performance, a stage caricature that would be immediately identifiable as "Chinaman." Significantly, the

⁷⁴ "My Partner," Rev. of *My Partner*, by Bartley Campbell, *The New York Times*, 17 Sep. 1879, 5:3.

reviewer's comments ("a very striking imitation of the imported Chinaman") imply that the performance was received as an accurate representation of a Chinese American. Parsloe's Wing Lee is a clumsy creature who is fond of the bottle and likes to dance – a perfect combination for an actor who likes to ham it up. In one scene, he steals a bottle of whiskey and hides it in his shirt. It doesn't take much to get it out of him, though; a white man barely begins to tickle Wing Lee and he gives up the bottle, laughing and jumping like a child. Because of Wing Lee's drunken tendencies, and, frankly, because he is "Other," he is immediately accused of killing the hero's partner when that man is found dead. This is where *My Partner*, like *Ah Sin*, creeps into an ambiguous territory in which it is difficult for a twentieth-century thinker to know just what is meant by the words spoken on stage. For, as a posse runs onstage to catch Wing Lee and hang him, the hero of the play refuses to let the lynching proceed:

OMNES. (*rushing at Wing Lee*) Hang him! Hang him!

JOE. Stop! No you don't! He's a poor heathen but the God who made him made us! He's a stranger in a strange land, and he don't neither understand our language or our laws. But I'll stake my life on his innocence, and before you take his life – ye'll have to give him a fair square trial.⁷⁵

On the surface, it seems that the hero has offered a defense of Wing Lee's humanity; indeed, he acknowledges that Wing was made by God, just like white men. Yet I would argue that this scene does not exist to suggest to the audience that Chinese men deserve to be treated with the same degree of humanity as white men. Rather, this speech is about Joe. The speech gives Joe an opportunity to show mercy, one of his key characteristics. In fact, Joe does not save his mercy only for Wing Lee. He also shows mercy to the heroine, Mary, who has had a baby out of

⁷⁵ Bartley Campbell, *My Partner, Favorite American Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Barret H. Clark (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1943) 75.

wedlock, fathered by another man. In response to Mary's assertions that she is unworthy of love or happiness because of her sin, Joe responds with a message of forgiveness:

JOE. I feel sartain Heaven will not be too hard on a poor gal as had no mother to guide her.

MARY. But, the world –

JOE. The world of Him who made it; the world of right and marcy [sic] and forgiveness has but one law for both sexes, and here where civilization has not built its temples, above the green groves of God – where men live nearer Him – wimmen have an equal claim with men to the charity that covers a great mistake.⁷⁶

Campbell uses Joe's passionate speeches about the broad-reach of God's mercy not to convince the audience of the claims that women and Chinese men deserve fair treatment, but to illustrate to the audience that Joe is a bold thinker and a man who stands up for what he believes. In short, Joe's speeches make *Joe* more impressive to the audience; they do not necessarily raise the audiences' opinions of Wing Lee or Mary. Thus, as is the case in *Ah Sin*, the audience was not likely to leave *My Partner* with a newfound belief that Chinese men should be treated with respect. Instead, they likely reminded one another of the silly tricks of the Chinaman, who tripped over his own feet and danced a foolish, drunken dance.

Bernard Francis Moore's 1899 *Poverty Flats* was not as well-known as *Ah Sin* or *My Partner*, yet it, too, featured the Chinese character as a *deus ex machina* who also served as comic relief. In this play, Win Lung is the cook of the camp. Like most Frontier Chinamen, Win Lung enjoys a diet of rats, mice, and cats; he also enjoys forcing his diet on unsuspecting whites in the community. While several previous Chinese characters "saved the day" by producing evidence at the last minute or by observing the villain take off his fake moustache, Win Lung stands apart from other Frontier Chinamen in that he literally, physically saves the life

⁷⁶ Campbell 94-95.

of the heroine; when the villain holds a knife to Miss Marion's throat, Win Lung uses a revolver to shoot the villain dead, freeing Marion from the grips of death.

Moreover, Win Lung is allowed to testify in court with relatively little resistance from white members of the community, a sharp contrast from earlier plays in which Chinese men were called upon to testify. In the typical fashion of the Frontier Chinaman, Win Lung's testimony frees the innocent hero from a death sentence. Through the course of the play, Win Lung has saved the lives of both the hero and the heroine. Yet, Moore is careful not to end his play with an image of a heroic Chinaman. Instead, after Win Lung successfully kills the villain with a difficult shot that must hit the villain without injuring the woman he has held as his hostage, Win Lung apparently loses all facility with the weapon. He brags to the gathering crowd that he is brave, saying "Win him gleatee man. . . . Win him blully bloy!" But at the same time, the stage directions indicate that Win "accidentally discharges the revolver and then hops around on one foot."⁷⁷ Thus although Win has twice saved the day, his final moments on stage have emasculated him. He has shot himself in the foot, thus eliminating any lasting image of the Chinese as a hero.

In addition to Wing Lee, Ah Sin, and Win Lung, a few other Chinese characters occupy ambiguous roles in nineteenth-century plays. Ambrose Bierce's skit, *The Peaceful Expulsion* and Frank Powers' full-length drama, *The First Born*, offer resistant images of the Chinese. Ambrose Bierce, a satirist known for his political commentary, uses *The Peaceful Expulsion* to make an interesting comment on the belief that Chinese laborers were heathens. This short allegorical sketch, which may have been a closet drama, features three characters – a politician, a Workingman (i.e., Workingman's Party), and a Chinaman – who are visited by Satan. As the politician and the Workingman sing about the horrors of Chinese immigration and the heathen

⁷⁷ Moore 34.

Chinese, the Chinaman, Tok Bak (i.e., “talk back”), enters the scene and offers cheap labor.

Satan enters with a speech nearly identical to one spoken by Jesus in Matthew 18:20. In the scene, Satan greets the three men, saying:

You see I keep my ancient word
Where two or three are gathered in my name,
There am I in their midst.⁷⁸

Significantly, the original speech in Matthew was a promise made by Jesus to his disciples that when two or three people who have been at odds are able to reconcile, he will be with them.

Satan's speech, though, does not encourage reconciliation between the three parties. Instead, it fosters more argument, with each person's response shedding light on his character. In response to Satan's speech, the politician cries, "O monstrous thief! / To quote the words of Shakespeare as your own," revealing a feigned cultural elitism. The workingman clearly disregards the politician's words and the importance of a literary figure like The Bard, saying, "Who's Shakespeare? What's his trade? / I've heard about the work o' that galoot / Till I'm jest sick!"

Only Tok Bak, the Chinese "heathen" catches the allusion to scripture. "Go sunny school," he tells the politician and the Workingman, "you'll know / Mo' Bible." The irony that the heathen is the one who recognizes the reference to the Christian holy book is lost upon the other characters, but perhaps not upon the audience. Bierce's sketch might lead one to believe that the politician and the Workingman are the heathens. Yet despite Tok Bak's knowledge of the Bible, he is still required to speak pidgin, and the other characters in the sketch completely disregard what he says because of his dialect.

While *Peaceful Expulsion* was a short sketch that may or may not have been performed in professional circuits, Frank Powers' 1897 *The First Born* found large audiences both in New

⁷⁸ Ambrose Bierce, *The Peaceful Expulsion, The Chinese Other: An Anthology of Plays* (Lanham: UP of America, 1997) 36.

York and in San Francisco. The play was so successful, in fact, that it ran for six weeks in New York City and a total of ten weeks in San Francisco. *The First Born* also differs from Bierce's play in that it primarily concerns the life of a group of Chinese-Americans in San Francisco's Chinatown. *The First Born* was "suspiciously similar" to *The Cat and the Cherub*, a collection of short stories by San Francisco writer, Chester Bailey Fernald, which were later adapted by Fernald into a stage play, the script of which has not survived.⁷⁹

The First Born, unlike earlier frontier dramas depicting Chinese as gibbering idiots, allows all but one of its thirteen Chinese characters to speak formal English. Only Way Get, the tour-guide, employs the stereotypical pidgin dialect, perhaps suggesting that the Chinese were clever enough to market their Otherness to tourists who wanted to see a real live Chinaman. The play further breaks stereotypes by including women. Because Chinese women were few in numbers in nineteenth-century California, it is not surprising that they had not previously appeared in frontier drama. The majority of Chinese women in San Francisco had been bought in China for the purpose of prostitution, and it is therefore not surprising that the female characters in *The First Born* have links to prostitution rings. The presence of women further breaks traditional models of the Frontier Chinaman in that it allows for the Chinese to be seen in a family context. They are not strange little bachelor men who are unlike Americans; they are, like the majority of Americans, pursuing life, liberty, and happiness within their families and their community. That their families may contain prostitutes does not seem to lessen the boldness of presenting a Chinese community in everyday life.

Dave Williams notes that Powers' play is also groundbreaking in that it incorporates a number of different Chinese characters, each with different personalities, jobs, and lives. In short, Powers has offered his audience a glimpse at a diverse group of Chinese laborers:

⁷⁹ Williams, *Misreading* 123-124.

"Powers' presentation of such diversity indicates his awareness that Chinese society had the same variety as its Euroamerican counterpart. By extension, he granted to the Chinese a humanity denied to them in previous portrayals."⁸⁰ The reviewer from *The San Francisco Chronicle* clearly appreciated the "authenticity" of the play: "The staging of the two scenes contained in the drama was excellent and faithfully portrayed some very common street pictures in the Chinese quarter."⁸¹ While *The First Born* clearly offers a resistant image of Chinese in America, it was by no means a trend setting play; many plays with stereotypical Chinese characters were produced in the years following the enormous popular success of *The First Born*. *The First Born*, then, appears to be more of an anomaly than a reflection of shifting attitudes.

Significantly, even those playwrights who attempted to challenge the stereotypical Chinaman did not offer images of the Chinese in conjunction with the railroad. Thus, to varying degrees of ridicule, the Frontier Chinaman is portrayed in American popular entertainment as a drunken, deceptive, inept, and weak creature who is incapable even of menial (and frequently feminized) jobs like the laundry. This hyper-feminized image of weak Chinese laborers stands in stark contrast to the reality of Chinese laborers who wielded pick-axes as they tunneled through granite, who easily handled explosives (a not-so-"feminine" job), and whose "diminutive" bodies were capable of hauling more debris than their white counterparts. Thus, while as many as 12,000 Chinese men labored to build a railroad that would make life easier for all Americans, popular entertainers continued to create and perpetuate an image of Chinese laborers that consistently denied them access to the very unity promised by the railroad they built.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Misreading* 126.

⁸¹ *San Francisco Chronicle* 11 May 1897, as qtd in Williams, *Misreading* 124.

Examples of Self-Representation

Despite (and perhaps because of) the overwhelmingly negative images of Irish, Black, and Chinese laborers in nineteenth-century popular entertainment, some members of these ethnic groups attempted to represent themselves in their own music and performance. Due to their positioning as key players in the entertainment business, Irish immigrants were more effective in reshaping the image of Irish immigrants in American culture. As such, Irish-American attempts at self-representation enjoyed widespread audiences. By contrast, Black and Chinese songs and performances were less visible to a mainstream audience. Nonetheless, each minority group used performance as a way to redefine – if only for themselves – what it meant to be Irish, Black, or Chinese in the United States of America. Significantly, many of these songs and performances dealt with the realities of daily life in America; topics range from railroad construction to loneliness to persecution.

In his 2004 study of immigrant music, Victor Greene notes that of songs written by Irish immigrants, “[t]he dominant theme of the songs, and hence the mentality of the group, while reveling in American freedom, still is one of great sacrifice and economic, psychic, and physical hardship.”⁸² Economic and physical hardship is certainly the theme of most Irish songs dealing with the railroad, particularly “Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill,” which refers not only to the hard physical labor of railroad construction, but also to the frequency with which Irish laborers were slighted pay or denied their wages. While several nineteenth-century plays portray the Irish as “eager to strike,” the Irish use songs like “Drill, Ye Tarriers, Drill” to establish the validity of their strike demands.

⁸² Victor Greene, *A Singing Ambivalence: American Immigrants Between Old World and New, 1830-1930* (Kent, OH: Kent State UP, 2004) 18.

In contrast to the portrayal of Irish immigrants gathering in a saloon to become inebriated and belligerent, the gathering of Irishmen in a bar is characterized by Irish writer/performer Ned Harrigan as filling a positive cultural need for the community in the 1878 song, “The Knights of St. Patrick.” In this song, a group of Irish Americans gather at the community pub to support one another:

Grand fellowship our aim,
We’re brothers one and all,
So swift we start with eager heart,
When charity makes a call.
Just like our Patron Saint,
We follow in his plan,
To do good to humanity,
And help our fellow man.⁸³

Whether by countering the claim that Irishmen are too quick to strike or by honoring the camaraderie so often characterized as “drunkenness,” Irish performers offered their fellow Irish Americans an image to be proud of.

Black Americans were, of course, most frequently represented in blackface minstrelsy. While the vast majority of minstrel troupes were, in fact, white (and often Irish) performers who corked up to portray the Stage Negro, a few Black Americans participated in blackface minstrelsy as musicians and performers sporadically throughout the mid-century and with more frequency after Emancipation. Yet despite the presence of such all-Black troupes as the Georgia Minstrels, Black performers were not in a position to drastically alter the stereotypes that had been established by white performers.⁸⁴ In fact, Black minstrel performers were required to wear the burnt cork and painted mouths that had come to signify blackface minstrelsy. Most Black minstrel troupes were managed by whites. Thus, despite the increasing presence of Black

⁸³ Jon W. Frison, ed., *Edward Harrigan and David Braham: Collected Songs, I: 1873-1882, Recent Researches in American Music* vol 27 (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1997) 62-63.

⁸⁴ Robert C. Toll, “Social Commentary in White Minstrelsy,” *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, Bean, et al. (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1996) 100.

performers in the late nineteenth century, the opportunities available for these Black singers, actors, and dancers were narrowly defined by the parameters of a white-constructed vision of what Black entertainment should look like. It is not surprising, then, that the stereotypes (Jim Crow, Zip Coon, etc) established by Thomas “Big Daddy” Rice and other white Americans persisted into the twentieth century, even among Black performers. Yet Black performers were occasionally successful in challenging the status quo of African American life. While these Black performers embodied the same “Jim Crow” stereotypes developed by white minstrels, they were able to use their popularity to fight small battles for Blacks in their audiences. Eileen Southern notes that Hicks’ Georgia Minstrels (an all-Black troupe with a Black manager) enjoyed such success and popularity that they were able to make certain demands:

Such was the power of the troupe that, when playing in Washington, D.C., in July 1869, the managers were able to demand that “colored persons [be] admitted to all parts of the house,” which, the press observed, was “something of a novelty for Washington.”⁸⁵

Thus, while it would be nearly half a century before Black entertainers found themselves in a position to make significant changes to the representation of Black Americans, pioneering Black performers were able to accomplish small but considerable changes along the way. Additionally, some popular African-American spiritual songs could certainly be read as self-representation. For the most part, however, these songs were not performed for white audiences.

Self-representation among Chinese-Americans began with Chinese theatres in San Francisco in the years immediately following the discovery of gold near Sacramento. Records indicate that at any given time, there were at least two Chinese theatre companies presenting traditional Chinese Operas. Significantly, prior to the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, Chinese theatre companies drew an integrated audience – Chinese and white

⁸⁵ Eileen Southern, “The Georgia Minstrels,” *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, 165.

Americans.⁸⁶ Countless Caucasian travelers and journalists attended the Chinese Opera as a novelty, a glimpse at the Chinese culture, and most Caucasian accounts of the Opera are laden with western prejudice. An article in *The Saturday Evening Post* of December 4, 1869, typifies the attempts of white America to describe a Chinese Opera:

The music they soon began "discoursing so eloquently" upon their barbarous instruments . . . was indescribable. A confused din, growing ever louder, harsher, and more grating. A more laughably absurd theatrical performance I could never have conceived of, it seemed altogether like ludicrous child's play.⁸⁷

Caucasian audience members in Chinese theatres became rarer as California fell into an economic depression, fueling an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment.

Violent riots occurred often at both Chinese and white theatres. White audience members at a white theatre in 1877 took issue with the presence of two Chinese merchants in the audience. A riot was prevented only by the arrival of a large police force. At Chinese theatres, violence was sometimes a product of frustrations among the Chinese community. This internal fighting often pitted "Americanized" Chinese against those immigrants who maintained strict adherence to Chinese cultural practices.⁸⁸ At other times, Chinese theatergoers were victims of violence at the hands of white Americans, as is illustrated by the tragic events of an October evening in 1877. A small fire in a Chinese theatre prompted a panicked stampede for the exits. The *Alta California* newspaper reported that while the dead and dying lay on the sidewalks, "a white man distinguished himself by passing along the sidewalk on the outskirts of the crowd, and pummeling every Chinaman he could get a lick at."⁸⁹ The reporter overheard several bigoted comments from whites in the crowd, the bulk of which expressed relief that no "whites" had

⁸⁶ Ronald Riddle, *Flying Dragons, Flowing Streams: Music in the Life of San Francisco's Chinese* (Westport, CT: Greenwood P, 1983) 38.

⁸⁷ "More About California," *Saturday Evening Post* (1839-1885) 4 Dec 1869.

⁸⁸ Riddle 39.

⁸⁹ qtd. in Riddle 41.

been wounded, and that any Chinese losses "didn't matter." Thus, while Chinese performers were free to perform traditional Chinese Operas in their own theatres, this self-representation was witnessed by few Caucasians who viewed the event as anything more than a novelty. Furthermore, legislation in the late 1870s limited the ability of Chinese to gather for self-representation; the ordinances, which prohibited the use of a gong on stage, made it virtually impossible for Chinese actors to perform in the traditional style of Chinese Opera.

Significantly, the self-representation offered at the Chinese Opera was ultimately a representation of what it meant to be Chinese; the stories and songs were imported from China. Chinese and Caucasian audiences rarely, if ever, witnessed performances that addressed what it meant to be a Chinese individual living in the United States. Such performances were limited to songs shared with fellow immigrants. A number of these songs were discovered etched in the walls of holding cells on Angel Island, the gateway to San Francisco for ships from China.

A subset of these songs is unique in that they tell the stories of the wives left behind in China. Victor Greene describes the intricacies of this grouping of immigrant music:

[T]he hopes and fears of women left behind are expressed by the *male* arrivals in America. Emigrant men would perform in gender reverse as wives or other females lamenting the loss of family members in works sung abroad . . . [B]y openly expressing themselves as women in song, men used the latter "as a vehicle of their own feelings."⁹⁰

The themes of loneliness and regret are unmistakable in these songs: "You said you went to Gold Mountain because of poverty at home. / You promised to return in just a few years. / But now I am left all by myself, solely accompanied by my loneliness."⁹¹ Other examples speak of "endless remorse," "deep resentment," and "a cruel separation."⁹² A number of these songs

⁹⁰ Greene 116.

⁹¹ Greene 117.

⁹² Marlon K. Hom, *Songs of Gold Mountain: Cantonese Rhymes From San Francisco Chinatown* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987) 115, 119.

portray wives who accuse their distant husbands of stupidity: One song asks, "Why did I end up with such a fool?" Another refers to the absent husband as a "moron."⁹³ Given the fact that these songs were written by the Chinese husbands in America, these accusatory phrases of disgust betray the Chinese men's feelings towards themselves.

Yet not all songs by Chinese immigrants contained sentiments of loneliness and self-disgust. Several songs reveal an attitude of resistance to white oppression. Greene observes that these songs written by Chinese immigrants told "not just of melancholy and pain but also of memories and sentiments of anger, bitterness, and protest against authorities."⁹⁴ Many of these songs were written after the passage of the Exclusion Act in 1882. They refer to immigration policies, imprisonment, and registration documents.

The fearsome harsh inspection terrified me.
The Chinese workers have endured so much but have survived.
We have [cut out] our hearts and guts seeking money.
Beautiful gold and silver is all stained with blood and sweat.
If you look closely you can see fresh wounds because we have competed with
American workers and aroused their heartless jealousy . . .
.....
You can resist only as a group and display the spirit of our people.⁹⁵

The lyrics of this song reveal an indiscriminating resentment: the narrator clearly resents the Americans who have "freshly" wounded him, but he also speaks with bitterness about what his fellow Chinese immigrants have suffered, all for money.

Another song is more blatantly directed at white America. Its ironic tone rings clear:

So, liberty is your national principle;
Why do you practice autocracy?
You don't uphold justice, you Americans,
You detain me in prison, guard me closely.
Your officials are wolves and tigers,

⁹³ Hom 114-115.

⁹⁴ Greene 113.

⁹⁵ Greene 122.

All ruthless, all wanting to bite me.
An innocent man implicated, such an injustice!⁹⁶

These and other songs convey a silent resistance to authority; when these songs were sung at community gatherings, Chinese immigrants were able to voice their own ideas about life in America. Floyd Cheung describes just such a performance of resistance in a recent article in *The Drama Review*. Following the Exclusion Act, Chinese laborers in Arizona were mistreated much as they were across the country. A group of Chinese residents in the territory of Arizona gathered in honor of a legendary Chinese hero who had advocated scattering men through the country to quietly gain support and to coordinate an attack that would take place later, when the conditions were in place.⁹⁷ A centuries' old society, The Chee Kung Tong ("Active Justice Society") initiated a branch of the society in Arizona. As part of the practices of the Society, the Chee Kung Tong enacted ritual performances of their Chinese hero. Cheung suggests that this ritual performance offered Chinese immigrants a chance to momentarily escape the oppression that surrounded them:

Looking toward China as their stage, these men figured Arizona as their staging ground, thereby cultivating a mindset that empowered them to enact resistance in one place through actions in the other. Motivated by the goal of patriotic rebellion, persecuted Arizona Chinese miners, farmers, laundrymen, cooks, and railroad workers transformed themselves into valiant warriors through ritual performance.⁹⁸

Cheung goes on to note that the members of the Chee Kung Tong did not stage a revolt in their community; they did not physically battle their oppressors. Rather, they "pursued psychological and indirect political resistance via identification with legendary heroes and via sublimation

⁹⁶ Hom 85.

⁹⁷ Floyd Cheung, "Performing Exclusion and Resistance: Anti-Chinese League and Chee Kung Tong Parades in Territorial Arizona," *The Drama Review* 46.1 (2002): 39-59.

⁹⁸ Cheung 40.

during private performances. . . Therefore, in public their silence not only presented a face of seeming docility but also contained rebellious fervor."⁹⁹

These songs and ritual performances reveal a much more honest impression of the life of a Chinese immigrant in the nineteenth century than do frontier songs and dramas written by white Americans. Yet, these lyrics of resistance were isolated in private spaces, such as jail cells and secret rituals. As such, the self-representation of Chinese Americans was not observed by the mainstream culture, a culture that continued to define "Chinamen" on its stages and in its popular entertainment.

Thus, while the image of Irish immigrants softened as Irish performers gained prominence in popular entertainment, the stereotypical Stage Negro and Stage Chinaman persisted into the twentieth century. Images of these ethnic groups were not reflective of the broad reaching accomplishments of minority laborers; rather, they consistently associated the Irish, Black, and Chinese with menial labor, incompetence, and stupidity.

Given the Boot

An 1878 or 1879 political cartoon published in California's stinging political newspaper, *The Wasp*, illustrates well the state of the minority railroad laborer in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The drawing, titled "Uncle Sam's Troublesome Bed Fellows," features an exasperated Uncle Sam, trying to get some sleep in an overcrowded bed (see Fig. 3.4). The scene includes six people: Uncle Sam, a Mormon, a Chinese man, a Native American, a Black man, and an Irish man. Prominently displayed on the footboard is the emblem of the Union, also featured in the logo for the Union Pacific Railroad. Uncle Sam is lying in a bed that represents the Union. He is clearly not comfortable sharing the bed (i.e., The Union) with so many

⁹⁹ Cheung 47.

"troublesome" characters. Apparently, Uncle Sam first got rid of the Mormon man who holds a "Polygamy" sign as an identifier. The Chinese man is the second to get the boot from the Union. It is unclear from the cartoon what will happen next. Will the Native American be the next to go? One sincerely doubts that Sam enjoys having a finger poked in his ear, so giving the Native American the next boot out of the Union would seem understandable. The Black man's facial expression indicates that he's just happy to be in bed with Uncle Sam; he appears to be giving Uncle Sam no real problems. The Irish man sleeps comfortably at the edge of the bed, hugging his bottle of whiskey.



Figure 3.4. "Uncle Sam's Troublesome Bedfellows" in "Cartoons on Current Topics" Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. No. 132:441

Significantly, this cartoon features drawings of stereotypical stage characters: the Stage Chinaman, the Stage Mormon, the Stage Savage, the Stage Negro, and the Stage Irishman. Each minority character is identified by the trait or vice that is most frequently linked to that

character's ethnicity or religion in popular entertainment. Thus, the Mormon clings onto "Polygamy," and the Irish man sleeps with the bottle. The Black man smiles broadly, like any good "Jim Crow" minstrel character would smile. The Native American wears feathers and fringe; he even appears to have an earring in his left ear. The Chinese man, of course, is identified by his lengthy queue and by his traditional dark shirt and baggy pants. By associating each of these characters with an oddity or a vice, the cartoonist clearly sides with the infuriated Uncle Sam, whose patience has worn thin, and who is merely trying to enjoy the benefits of sleeping in the bed (i.e., The Union). "I can only take so much!" he seems to be thinking. And the illustrator has rendered Sam's pesky bedfellows so as to elicit a similar reaction from viewers.

In this cartoon, the men who built the railroad – the men who united the States – are portrayed as undeserving of the promises, rewards, and benefits of the Unity they labored to achieve. While this particular drawing suggests that only the Mormons and the Chinese have been given the official "boot" out of the Union, the cartoon seems to suggest that further expulsions may occur in the near future. Countless other illustrations, songs, and plays from the nineteenth century reflected and perpetuated a similar worldview: that Uncle Sam (i.e., traditional, white Americans) deserved the right to sleep in a comfortable bed and to enjoy the luxuries of a Union. Furthermore, such popular entertainments established that the Uncle Sam's of the world also had the right to decide who would share their bed, who would stay in the Union, and who would ultimately be given title to the promises of "America."

Chapter 4

Divide and Conquer; Or, “My White, Black, and Yellow Boys”: Ethnic Jockeying in Late Nineteenth-Century American Entertainment

Despite the undeniable contributions of Irish, Black, and Chinese railroad crews in the effort to unite the nation, popular entertainers chose not to present Irish, Black, and Chinese characters as railroad laborers. Rather, these ethnic groups were represented in plays and songs as foolish, strange creatures with comical vices. While Chapter Three dealt with the contrast between the characteristic portrayal of ethnic characters and the reality of their significant contribution – particularly as railroad laborers –to the development and maintenance of a *United States*, Chapter Four explores more deeply the techniques by which writers and performers reflected and fueled an ideology that ensured that the Unity offered by the railroad would remain open only to those who fit a very narrow definition of "American." Specifically, this chapter will address the ways in which nineteenth-century popular entertainment pitted ethnic groups against one another and applied a "divide-and-conquer" approach to the preservation of the America its audience cherished.

This "ethnic jockeying" existed in nineteenth-century popular entertainment in part as a reflection of very real – and very well known – conflicts between ethnic groups fighting for jobs and privileges. Most famous, perhaps, were the "friendly" competitions between Irish laborers on the Union Pacific and Chinese laborers on the Central Pacific as both companies graded through Utah. Such rivalry spurred furious track laying; it also resulted in more than a few deaths, particularly along a stretch near Promontory Summit where a number of Chinese and Irish laborers were injured and/or buried alive. Newspaper reporters chronicled the "bitter rivalry" and the nation eagerly consumed stories of intense competition between Irish and Chinese laborers. These stories, of course, rarely mentioned that Irish and Chinese crews

worked side by side on the Central Pacific, cooperating in a complicated assembly line of railroad construction. Thus, going into the era following the completion of the first transcontinental railroad, Americans had already been "primed" for stories about ethnic groups fighting each other.

Conflict between the Irish and Chinese did not just exist "on the job." Indeed, the competition between Irish and Chinese laborers began to center on who would *get* the job to begin with. This debate resulted in strikes, unions, and ultimately the anti-Chinese movement that was responsible for passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Faithful readers of newspapers would have been aware of the tensions between Irish and Chinese laborers; even stories that seemed to offer hope of Irish-Chinese cooperation quickly disintegrated into intense rhetoric and rivalry, as is evidenced by an 1870 strike at a shoe-factory in North Adams, Massachusetts. The factory's owner had brought in 75 Chinese laborers from California to be scabs when Irish workers walked off the job. The Irish laborers made a half-hearted attempt to welcome Chinese laborers into their labor union after they realized their jobs were at stake. When the Irish laborers saw that the factory owner was happy with his new Chinese crew and had no intention of bargaining with them, the Irish workers began an effort to help the Chinese form their own union under the same umbrella organization. These efforts collapsed, however, when several Irish workers turned on the Chinese at an organizational meeting, "condemning them for reducing 'American labor' to 'the Chinese standard of rice and rats.'"¹

Following the depression of 1873, Irish antagonism toward Chinese labor spread outside of the workplace and into governmental chambers; Americans soon became aware of the passionate political fight being waged by California's Irish-American politicians against Chinese immigrants. The movement, led by Irish immigrant Denis Kearney, resulted in the formation of

¹ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, 1993) 149.

the Workingmen's Party of California in 1877. Kearney and other activists (many of them Irish) used venomous rhetoric to convince those in political office to vote for an end to Chinese immigration.

It was not just Irish men who participated in this anti-Chinese movement. Historian Martha Gardner notes that there was a significant female presence in the movement to ban Chinese immigration:

In both word and deed, white women were central to the anti-Chinese movement in San Francisco. In word, stories of victimhood of white working women provided the growing labor movement a fictionalized emotional center. Narratives such as Mary Wollaston's attacked Chinese labor through the guise of protecting working-class women from exploitation, thus legitimating the efforts of the white male labor movement to unionize white male workers and prohibit Asian immigration.²

Kearney's rhetoric frequently referenced the working Irish female who was forced into prostitution after a Chinese servant stole her position as a maid. Such narratives filled campaign speeches and tracts that were covered in newspaper articles. They also appeared in numerous songs, minstrel acts, and plays.

Yet to conclude that these narratives, and others like them, were represented in popular entertainment merely as a reflection of the cultural climate would be to deny the power of performance to shape, direct, and nudge a society even as it reflects existent aspects of that society. Thus it is necessary to explore the reasons why popular entertainers might want to stage ethnic conflicts and why these tropes resonated so clearly with audiences. Narratives of "ethnic jockeying" served three important functions in maintaining the "American" way of life. First, they fueled an antagonistic relationship between minority laborers. By portraying Irish, Black, and Chinese characters as incapable of peaceful co-existence, writers and artists validated

² Martha Mabie Gardner, "Working on White Womanhood: White Working Women in the San Francisco Anti-Chinese Movement, 1877-1890," *Journal of Social History* 33.1 (1999): 73-95.

existing ethnic conflicts and justified future clashes, particularly when Irish and Black citizens made up part of the audience.

Second, narratives of "ethnic jockeying" alleviated concerns of white audience members by allowing them to laugh at the comic antics of bickering minorities; such antics dispelled any threat of the minorities "uniting" to rise against the majority. They also permitted a white audience to "make sense" of the minorities in their midst without having to include minorities in their definition of "American." Robert Toll describes this process of "dividing and conquering" in *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy*:

Exaggerating these ethnic 'peculiarities' and *minimizing or ignoring their commonplace features*, minstrels and their vaudeville successors molded distinct ethnic caricatures, each of which sharply contrasted to all the others. Furthermore, since minstrels presented them as if they were adequate representations of these groups, these caricatures made America's human heterogeneity and complexity seem comprehensible and psychologically manageable to members of the audience. Although the minstrels only intended to entertain their public and to increase their own popularity, what they did in the process was to embed ethnic stereotypes in their audience's minds (emphasis mine).³

Staging ethnic conflicts established the "difference" of and between minorities, a difference that resulted in violent behavior, that threatened the "American" way of life, and that prevented members of ethnic groups from laying claim to the title of "American."

Finally, "ethnic jockeying" applied the group-versus-group rhetoric to individual acts of violence on stage, thus permitting crime against individuals who embody or stand-in for the group as a whole. Kearney's intense political rhetoric ("if the ballot fails, the bullet!"⁴), intended to eliminate the Chinese as a *group*, is translated on stage into a rallying cry for acts of violence on specific and frequently solitary Chinese laborers. Thus, songs and plays that staged "ethnic

³ Robert C. Toll, "Social Commentary in White Minstrelsy," *Inside the Minstrel Mask: Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1996) 92.

⁴ qtd. in William J. Courtney, *San Francisco's Anti-Chinese Ordinances, 1850-1900* (San Francisco: R & E Research, 1974) 66-67.

jockeying" frequently permitted and modeled crime against ethnic individuals as a means to confront a "group" threat.

Ethnic Jockeying In Nineteenth-Century Songs and Plays

Before any gold is found; before the gal is called a "nugget"; and before the hero first encounters the villain in disguise, the Widow in George M. Baker's *Nevada; or, The Lost Mine* establishes a hierarchy among the miners in camp. "My boys," she calls them, "white, black, and yellow."⁵ As the plot unfolds, the world of *Nevada* indeed abides by an unstated yet ever-present hierarchy. The purest residents of the frontier are white, of course, for as Ronald Takaki notes, the nineteenth century saw a "dominant ideology that defined America as a racially homogenous society and Americans as white."⁶ The non-white, non-"American" residents of the frontier contested for the second-place position. In nineteenth-century songs, sketches, and plays, Irish characters seem to have laid claim to that status, leaving the Black and Chinese characters to duke it out for any remnants of human dignity. Indeed a large number of nineteenth-century songs, sketches, and plays contain scenes in which ethnic "type" characters jockey to position themselves within a pecking order of frontier merit. Such scenes are frequently sources of humor within frontier songs and plays. Thus, popular entertainment provided audiences with a glimpse of impurity (the "Un-American") without forcing them to consider their own impurities and inhumanity; the social ladder that assures the playgoers' own position of authority remains firmly in place.

There are dozens of songs, minstrel acts, and frontier melodramas that contain Irish, Black, and Chinese characters in interaction with one another; these scenes frequently fall into one of three broad tropes that are consistently employed in interactions between minority

⁵ George M. Baker, *Nevada; or, The Lost Mine* (Boston: Baker, 1882) 7.

⁶ Takaki, *Different* 204.

characters in music and frontier drama: 1) name-calling; 2) romantic flirtation with females outside of a character's own ethnicity; and 3) physical contact between minority characters in which weaker characters are beaten to a pulp or otherwise humiliated. Within each of these scenarios, Irish characters come out on top and Chinese characters are shown to be at the lowest level of humanity.

Name-calling exists on multiple levels in frontier melodrama. Very few characters (regardless of race or gender) emerge unscathed. Yet, while some characters receive labels such as "Nugget" and "obstinate little brute," minority characters are made to endure name-calling on a much more hateful level. Significantly, while most white characters receive their nicknames and labels based on their individual behavior and personality, minority characters frequently become targets of labels that are meant to apply to the entire race they represent. The heroine, the hero's best friend, and similar white characters exist as distinct personalities and are therefore not necessarily representative of *all* frontiersmen, *all* miners, or *all* whites. The Irishman, the Negro, and the Chinaman, however, often stand in for their entire race; as such, the insults thrown at them and the name-calling they endure is clearly directed at the race as a whole rather than an isolated character on stage.

Non-Irish whites, of course, occupied the greatest position of power in frontier narratives. They do not hesitate to hurl disparaging remarks at any person, regardless of ethnicity. Even so, they seem to denigrate Chinese characters more often than they do Black and/or Irish characters. Thus before the words of minority characters are even addressed, it is clear that, like Mother Merton in *Nevada*, white characters in frontier narratives accept and participate in a hierarchy of humanity in which they reside comfortably atop lesser whites (the Irish), Blacks, and Chinese.

Not surprisingly, minority characters – who are, of course, created by and performed by white Americans – participate in behavior that reinforces the established hierarchy. Among minority name-callers, Irish characters seem to hurl insults more than other minorities. They frequently call Black characters, "nagurs." In Charles' Townsend's *The Golden Gulch*, the Irish character calls the blackface character a "black imp o' Satan."⁷ Irish jabs at blackface characters are not limited to mean nicknames; in *Nevada*, the Irish character (Silas Steele) and the blackface character (Jube) exchange a dialogue culminating in a racially based one-liner. An advertiser who uses whitewash to paint product slogans on rocks, Silas introduces himself to Jube, the community's only Black resident:

SILAS. Name, Silas Steele. Occupation, painter and decorator. For further particulars seek any prominent boulder, and look out for paint.
JUBE. Golly! dar's a heap er talent in dat ar brush, I know; fur I used to whitewash myself.
SILAS. Whitewash yourself? You took a big contract.⁸

One can almost hear the audience groan with delight at the Irishman's pun. Ironically, the actor playing Jube had to *blacken* his face before he made his first appearance on stage. With the presence of a white actor portraying a Black man, the joke takes on another level. The audience, who was, of course, quite aware of the practice of "corking up" to achieve a blackface effect, would undoubtedly have "gotten" the joke on two levels. On the level of theatricality, the audience might have enjoyed a laugh as the characters indirectly referenced and poked fun at standard conventions of minstrelsy. In this sense, the joke truly was a one-liner to be enjoyed at the theatre and left at the door on the way home. On another level, though, the joke must have elicited the laughter of an audience comfortable with its own place in society, comfortable with the reality that while white actors can play "dress up" and become Black men, real-life Black

⁷ Charles Townsend, *The Golden Gulch* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1893) 22.

⁸ Baker 15.

men – no matter how hard they try – can never "whitewash" themselves enough to pass as "real" Americans.

While Irish characters do not hesitate to poke fun at Black characters, they reserve their most intense insults for Chinese characters, reflecting a widespread belief at the end of the nineteenth century that Chinese laborers were stealing jobs from Irish and other white immigrants. Both Irish men and women participate in verbal attacks against the Chinese in songs, sketches, and full-length dramas. Dollie, an Irish maid in *Sunlight; or, The Diamond King*, calls the Chinese servant, Win Klee, a "yellow eyed devil" and beats him with a broom.⁹ In addition to degrading the Chinese servant with a racially motivated insult, Dollie's actions also emasculate Win Klee, who is easily chased off stage by a female armed only with the very feminine "weapon" of a household broom. Similar Irish maids appear in dramas such as *The Old Fashioned Husking Bee*, *The Forty Niners*, and *Poverty Flats*. In nearly every case, the Irish maid either complains about the Chinese servant's cooking (which usually involves rodents) or demands that the Chinese man be removed from the household.

Male Irish characters, as a rule, refer to the Chinese as "haythens," "devils," and "yaller nagurs." Many Irish characters refer to the Chinese in relation to labor issues, as can be seen in *Crawford's Claim*. In this play, co-authored by J.E. Cowley and Wilson T. Bennette, the Irish character (Mike) complains about the Chinese in America: "If the government can't get rid of them," he says, "I'll start up a private exodus on my own account."¹⁰ Significantly, Mike does not say this under his breath; he says it directly to the Chinese character, Ling Ling. He asks Ling Ling to join him in a toast:

MIKE. Haythen, join me in this toast:

⁹ George H. Hamilton, *Sunlight; or, The Diamond King* (Clyde, OH: Ames, 1896).

¹⁰ J.E. Cowley and Wilson T. Bennette, *Crawford's Claim; or, Nugget Nell, the Pet of Poker Flat* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1890) 22.

'Here's that the angels above may send down a dove, with wings as sharp
as razors, and cut the throat of every haythen Chinee that tries to cut
down the laboring man's wages.'
There, drink that, and may it choke ye.¹¹

It is not clear in the script whether Ling Ling drinks to the toast or not. It is clear, however, that Mike maintains a position of power over Ling Ling throughout the rest of the play.

Irish women also joined the anti-Chinese labor movement in popular songs and plays. Music historian Krystyn Moon comments on the frequency of songs centered on Chinese workers taking jobs from Irish women:

A common site of conflict in anti-Chinese songs was the laundry. . . . Because Chinese laundries were often in competition with those run by Irish immigrant women, this conflict was a venue to question Chinese masculinity and to draw attention to the tensions between Chinese and Irish workers.¹²

The chorus of the 1871 song "Since the Chinese Ruint' the Thrade" voices the frustration of an Irish washerwoman:

For I kin wash an' iron a shirt,
An' I kin scrub a flure;
An' I kin starch a collar as stiff
As any Chineseman, I'm shure;
But the dhirty, pigtailed haythens,
An' ther prices they are paid
Have brought me to the state you see –
They've ontirely ruint ther thrade.

As is the case with many anti-Chinese songs voiced by Irish narrators, the song quickly turns threatening, echoing an early political speech in which Denis Kearney encouraged citizens to take labor matters into their own hands: "Before I starve in a country like this," he said, " I will

¹¹ Cowley 23.

¹² Moon 49.

cut a man's throat and take whatever he has got."¹³ The Irish washerwoman ends her song with a promise to obey Kearney's words:

It makes me wild, whin I'm on the street,
To see those haythens' signs:
Ah Sung, Ah Sing, Sam Lee, Ah Wing,
An' ther ilegant sprid on their lines.
If iver I get me hands on Ah Sing,
I'll make him Ah Sing indade –
On me clothesline I'll pin the leather skin
Of the haythen that ruint the thrade.¹⁴

This threatening tone was not limited to west coast songs, like "Since the Chinese Ruint the Thrade" which was published in San Francisco. The Irish narrator in Pat Rooney's comic song, "Is that Mr. Reilly?" sings about what he would do if he were elected to office in New York City:

I'd have nothing but Irishmen on the police,
Patrick's Day will be the Fourth of July,
I'd get me a thousand infernal machines
To teach the Chinese how to die.¹⁵

While Mr. Reilly does not promise to kill the Chinese with his own hands, the song makes it clear that Reilly intends to rid New York of Chinese laborers. Thus, antagonism between Irish and Chinese laborers off the stage is reflected in the popular songs and plays of the late nineteenth century, frequently employing established political rhetoric to make a point. In some cases, the "point" is the same point made by Kearney: "The Chinese Must Go." In other cases, though, the extreme rhetoric of the Stage Irishman is used not just to criticize Chinese labor but also to make fun of the Irishman's temper and passion. Despite the occasional critique of Irish politicians, however, the majority of anti-Chinese songs narrated by Irish support the anti-Chinese cause.

¹³ qtd. in Chang 125.

¹⁴ "Since The Chinese Ruint The Thrade," *Songs of the American West* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1968) 308.

¹⁵ Pat Rooney, "Is That Mr. Reilly?" 1883, *Music for the Nation*, Online, Library of Congress 23 Sep. 2005.

Thus, while Irish characters did not particularly respect any of their minority colleagues, they frequently reserved their strongest rhetoric for use against Chinese laborers. An incident in *The Golden Gulch* further illustrates that while Irish characters felt contempt for both Black and Chinese characters, they believed that Chinese characters were lower than any other minority character. Finding that he shares a love of the bottle with Senator Juniper Toots (a Black character), the Irishman Fergus O'Gooligan befriends Toots and the two men spend nearly every moment together. O'Gooligan reflects on his new-found inter-racial friendship: "Oi niver before in all me loife associated wid a nagur, but out here Oi'd associate wid onybody, bedad."¹⁶ O'Gooligan's statement is a back-handed compliment of sorts; it acknowledges a friendship with a Black character, but it also seems to apologize for that friendship and to justify the friendship by blaming the "rough" land in which the action takes place. Further, O'Gooligan's claim that he was desperate enough to associate with "onybody" in Golden Gulch isn't exactly a statement of support for Toots. As it turns out, though, "onybody" does not really mean "anybody" in O'Gooligan's estimation. A few lines after saying he'd associate with anybody, O'Gooligan witnesses Toots speaking to the Chinese character, One Lung. He immediately decides that he can no longer associate with Toots: "Oi'll not associate wid that air nagur any more; ony mon that'll go off arm in arm wid a haythen Chinazer is beneath me contempt."¹⁷ O'Gooligan's actions reveal at least two implications. First, O'Gooligan's willingness to befriend a Black man before he would a Chinese man indicates that the Irish man is buying into an established hierarchy. Second, O'Gooligan's immediate dumping of Toots suggests that for O'Gooligan, as was the case for many Irish workingmen in the late nineteenth century, one's friends and enemies were largely determined by where they fell in regards to "The Chinese Question." By

¹⁶ Townsend 32.

¹⁷ Townsend 32.

associating with One Lung, Toots failed to demonstrate to O'Gooligan that he would side with the Irish against the presence of Chinese in America.

Significantly, while Irish characters label both Black characters and Chinese characters as "nagurs," Black characters do not consider themselves to be on par with the Chinese. Black characters rarely insult white characters, including the Irish.¹⁸ Yet most blackface characters seem happy to join their Irish colleagues in hurling insults at the Chinese. By extension, these Black characters question the right of the Chinese to call themselves "American." The Black servant in Henry L. Williams' minstrel play *Wax Works at Play* voices emphatically that the Chinese servant Wing Fat does not deserve to be employed because, in his opinion, jobs should go to Americans; the servant, Mat, insists that while Blacks *are* Americans, the Chinese are most certainly not.¹⁹ The blackface character in the sketch "Bric-A-Brac; or, De Yaller Chinee" offers a typical commentary on Chinese laborers, their eating habits, and their appearance: "He eats little mice, when de blackberries fail, / Till de ha'r on his head gits de shape ob a tail." The character's observations lead him to conclude that the "Yaller Chinee" does not belong in America: "Dis country was made for de whites an' de blacks," he says, clearly aligning himself with white America while relegating the Chinese man to the animal kingdom.²⁰

When Black characters are not directly voicing their belief that the Chinese should be excluded from America, they are involved in scenarios in which Chinese characters are shown to be incompetent. Once the Chinese character has demonstrated his foolishness, the Black character takes the opportunity to insult the Chinese man using rhetoric that frequently echoes the Kearney's of the day. For example, Jube, the blackface character in *Nevada*, initially spends a great deal of time with the Chinese character, Win-Kye, trying to "mentor" him into society.

¹⁸ An exception can be found in *The Golden Gulch*, in which Toots calls O'Gooligan "white trash."

¹⁹ Henry L. Williams, *Wax Works at Play* (Chicago: T.S. Denison, 1894) 6.

²⁰ "Bric-A-Brac; or, De Yaller Chinee," *The Century: A Popular Quarterly* 23.1 (1881): 158.

While Jube is portrayed as unable to speak properly and as a little dim-witted, Win-Kye is shown to be little more than a silly child. Discovering the Irishman's can of whitewash, Win-Kye begins to paint everything in sight, including Jube's face. Jube utters his disgust at Win-Kye's complete inability to appreciate the Black character's efforts:

JUBE. Look here, you Celestial imp, quit yer fool! . . . Dis years de melencolic effect ob tryin' to turn a mongo into a Sambo. I's jes' tried to cibilize dat ar heathen, to gib him a brack heart; an' he no sooner gits a hold ob a paint-brush, off he goes, like old Nebacanooser, on a tear.²¹

Like the earlier joke in which the Irish and Black characters exchange witty dialogue about whitewashing, this scene finds humor in the allusion to the convention of "corking up." The scene also serves to put both the Chinese and Black characters in their respective places. By chastising Win-Kye, Jube positions himself above the Chinese character; but by speaking in standard blackface dialect, and by uttering malapropisms, Jube reveals himself to be beneath white characters and, by extension, the white audience.

While most interactions between Black and Chinese characters are done for comic effect, there are occasional moments in which Black characters' anti-Chinese rhetoric moves into the realm of violent threats, akin to those uttered by the Workingmen's Party of California. In the 1870 song "Nigger Versus Chinese" by Harry E. Lorraine, the blackface narrator acknowledges that Chinese laborers pose a threat to newly freed Blacks: "Since niggerman hab been made free, De Chinese hab come ober, / To earn a dollar or two, and den go back and lib in clobber." He insists, however, that Chinese laborers pale in comparison to Black labor: "But what can all de Chinese do alongside ob de Nigger!" The narrator ends the song with a threat to the Chinese in

²¹ Baker 40.

America: leave or else we'll make you leave. "De sun will crack de Chinese head," he sings, "And if dat does not suit, / De nigger will run him off the track, and den he'll bust his snoot."²²

While both Irish and Black characters participate in anti-Chinese name-calling, Chinese characters rarely insult the Irish or Black characters. In *Sunlight; or, The Diamond King*, Win Klee does refer to the Black character as a "coon," but he does so only after the Black character has referred to himself by the same name. Chinese characters do not call Irish characters derogatory names; if they address Irish characters by any name at all (other than their given name) it is "Ilish" or "Ilishman."²³ Judging by the amount of and source of name-calling that takes place in nineteenth-century songs and plays, it seems clear that Irish characters were ranked higher than Black characters, who were, in turn, positioned above Chinese characters in a hierarchy of (in)humanity.

A second trope of ethnic interaction in nineteenth-century music and theatre is the scenario in which a man (usually Chinese) attempts to flirt with a female outside of his own ethnicity. This scenario finds many manifestations in frontier drama, minstrelsy, and popular music. Two plays, Augustin Daly's *Horizon* and Townsend's *The Golden Gulch*, include scenes in which Native American men attempt to woo white women. Indeed, the plot of *Horizon* centers on the terror that ensues when Wannemucka wishes to claim a white woman for his bride. Old Magnus, the Native American character in *The Golden Gulch* is, in some ways, not as bold as Wannemucka. Magnus does not presume to think that a white woman would be attracted to a Native American man; thus, he does not reveal his ethnicity to Matilda, the girl he tries to woo. Yet, in concealing his identity, Magnus proves to be even bolder than Wannemucka, for he woos Matilda disguised as a white man. Having beaten up the sissy boy from the east coast,

²² Harry E. Lorraine, "Nigger Versus Chinese," (St. Louis: Balmer, 1870).

²³ Hamilton 14; Townsend 34.

Magnus dresses in the white man's clothes and wears his hat as he flirts with Matilda. That she sees through his disguise does not lessen the boldness of his action. In the world of nineteenth-century popular entertainment, it was perfectly acceptable for a white man to don the apparel of a Black man or a Chinese man – indeed white actors participated in this "disguise" every day. Yet it was not acceptable for any man of color – whether an actor or a fictional character – to present himself as white. Neither of these Native American men is successful in wooing white brides. Wannemucka's tribe is obliterated by the U.S. army, who come to rescue the "Americans" from the violent savages. And Old Magnus is easily disposed of by his intended victim, Matilda, who "slaps his face" and "knocks him backward."²⁴ In both cases, white women have retained their position in the established racial hierarchy.

More often than not, inter-racial flirtation in nineteenth-century popular entertainment takes place between a Chinese man and a white woman, usually an Irish maid. In *The Forty-Niners*, Wun Lung attempts to court Molly, the Irish maid, telling her he loves her with blazing passion: "Me lovee like blaze; plutty flace, led headee, me lovee Ilish gal." The stage directions clearly indicate the vehemence with which Molly responds to Wun Lung's advances: "She grabs him by the neck and pantaloons, runs him up stage and flings him out of the bay window."²⁵ The Chinese character in *Sunlight* professes his love to Dollie and proposes marriage to her. She proceeds to chase him offstage while beating him with a broom. In both cases, the Irish maid easily puts a stop to unwanted advances from the town Chinaman. Dave Williams addresses the two functions of such scenarios, which "simultaneously portray the Chinese as sexual predators and reassure Euroamerican men that Euroamerican woman [sic] would be able to resist such

²⁴ Townsend 27-28.

²⁵ T. W. Hanshew, *The Forty-Niners; or, The Pioneer's Daughter* (Clyde, OH: Ames, 1879) 17.

attempts at foreign appropriation."²⁶ Indeed, scenarios in which Chinese men flirt with Irish women permit male audience members to consider a lascivious sexual fantasy within the safe confines of a fictionalized narrative in which the Chinese man is ultimately impotent and the white female remains pure for "real" men.

"Hay Sing, Come From China" tells a similar tale. This time, though, the story is told by the Chinese character, giving the Chinese man a sense of control over the story that does not exist in theatrical performance. In the chorus of the song, the Chinese narrator, Hay Sing, rejoices in his happy life:

Me got an Irish girl, she well nicee.
Me makee her some day my wife.
We have a nice time, go back China,
Eat much plenty rats and mice.

Hay Sing goes on to confess that the Irish girl "hit me on the eye" and that eventually a "Melican" man "come along [and] steal an Irish girl from a poor Chinee."²⁷ Once more, the Chinese man is beaten up by the Irish girl and the girl ends up with a white man.

It is unclear whether the Irish girl in "Hay Sing" invited Hay Sing's advances; in most cases, however, the Chinaman's advances are uninvited, as in *The Forty-Niners* and *Sunlight*. An exception is Bartley Campbell's frontier hit, *My Partner* in which the Irish maid, Posie, says to Wing Lee, "I like you," and a few lines later, "Oh, yes! I'm in love with you." Wing Lee responds by announcing his intentions to "makee mashee," saying, "Chinaman no likee Chinawoman. He likee Melican woman – me likee you."²⁸ Despite Posie's initiation of this conversation, she immediately takes offense that a Chinese man would be so forward with her.

²⁶ Williams, *Misreading* 197.

²⁷ "Hay Sing, Come From China," *Songs of the American West*, 304.

²⁸ Bartley Campbell, *My Partner, Favorite American Plays of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Barrett H. Clark (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1943) 92-93.

She screams in horror, and Wing runs offstage. This scene reinforces the notion that while it is acceptable for white people to explore what it might be like to be of a different race or to associate with members of a different race, it is certainly not acceptable for a member of another race to envision a world in which they are partners with a white person. Thus, whether Posie initiated the flirtation or not, Wing Lee was bound to be beaten up for his participation. To allow him to get away with involvement in a flirtatious moment would be to shake the foundations of the hierarchy that audiences relied upon. Interestingly, Wing Lee has referred to Posie as a "Melican woman," suggesting that Wing views Irish immigrants as American. He still, however, refers to himself as a Chinaman, indicating that he either recognizes that he is not considered an American or else chooses not to become Americanized.

The white boss in *Wax Works at Play* takes offense when a Chinese character flirts with a Black woman in a scene that further cements the hierarchy of (in)humanity. In this play, the Caucasian wax sculptor, Mr. Pattern, has masterminded an intricate practical joke on his Black servant, Mat, who seems to think he could do just as well as Mr. Pattern at carving figures out of wax. Mr. Pattern arranges for his friends to pose as wax figurines and then come to life, scaring Mat and making him realize that he really should stick with servant's work. In the process of the evening, Mat tries to get his Black girlfriend Lulu the laundry job that currently belongs to the Chinese laundryman, Wing Fat. With Wing Fat, Mat, and Lulu all in the same room, the "wax figure" of Cupid comes to life and "arranges" for Wing Fat to fall in love with Lulu, and vice versa. Wing Fat proposes to Lulu – "me lovee you! we makee biz and washee-washee."²⁹ Lulu enthusiastically accepts the offer. After Mr. Pattern exposes the joke, Mat asks forgiveness for trying to overstep his bounds. Pattern welcomes Mat back into the wax studio, and adds that he would gladly have given Lulu the laundry job if she hadn't just sworn her love to a "Chinee."

²⁹ Williams, *Wax Works* 12.

Lulu spurns Wing Fat, and Mr. Pattern offers her the job. Thus despite the fact that a white person playing "Cupid" initiated the entire exchange, the flirtation between Wing Fat and Lulu was resolved such that the Chinese man was shown to be lower in rank than a Black woman. At the conclusion of the play, all characters are safely contained in their respective spheres: the white man is once again in charge; the Black man and Black woman are happily together and employed; and the Chinaman is solitary and out of the picture.

Another common example of "ethnic jockeying" is the scenario in which Irish, Black, and Chinese characters participate in a physical contest to claim superiority over one another. While there are certainly scenes of deadly violence against Black and Chinese characters at the hands of white Americans, scenes involving physical contests are frequently played for comedy when the contest does not involve white men. Frank Dumont's *Little Miss Nobody* offers a fine example of a physical contest that takes the form of slapstick involving bear costumes, barrels, and flour sacks. It's a scene that would make the Three Stooges proud. The audience first meets Barney and Berry dressed in bear costumes. Barney, the Irish character, is a polar bear; Berry, the Black character, is a Black bear. These silly boys accidentally swap heads, so that the polar bear has a Black head and vice versa. Berry catches the mistake, saying "The idea of a nigger being a white bear; who ever hear of such a thing!"³⁰ From their first entrance, Barney and Berry are buddies, albeit buddies who don't always agree. Barney and Berry join the Dutch character, Otto, in frequent debates about the relative strengths and weaknesses of Blacks, Irish, and Dutch. A scene in which Barney insists Berry and Otto call him Mr. Dooley quickly escalates to a near brawl:

BARNEY. So hereafter you'll call me Mr. Bernard Dooley, or nothing at all.

BERRY. Dat's it. You're nothing at all.

³⁰ Frank Dumont, *Little Miss Nobody* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1916) 20.

BARNEY. First thing you know I'll throw you into the sluice and into the water-wheel and grind you up into charcoal dust, ye black lump of ignorance.

BERRY. No you don't! If you fool with me I'll chuck you in front of that saw and there'll be a flannel-mouth Mick cut up into a lot of shamrocks.

BARNEY. I'll pull the wool off of ye!

BERRY. Come up here and I'll send you back again.

BARNEY. Stand in front of my fist and I'll push your face on the floor.³¹

Despite the hateful names hurled back and forth, this scene between Barney and Berry is comical. In fact, the two men never hit one another. The stage directions indicate that they are merely *preparing* to fight. That the men speak such threatening words and yet never act upon them reveals them to be nothing but talk. No one really gets hurt by the argument, and the audience gets a laugh out of the spectacle.

While Barney and Berry do not physically hurt one another, they do team up to beat up the Chinese servant, Gee Ho. After the Dutch character hides in a barrel and scares them, Barney and Berry run offstage to plot revenge against the Dutchman. In the mean time, however, the Dutch character has left the barrel, and Gee Ho has climbed in, thinking there must be something good inside. Barney and Berry return and begin to beat the tar out of the barrel, thinking the Dutch character is inside. Once they realize they've been beating Gee Ho rather than Otto, they beat Gee Ho even more and continue to beat him throughout the rest of the play. In fact, Barney states on more than one occasion that he will remove Gee Ho's pants: "I'll bet I'll get those pants the Chinaman has on. . . . I'll have those pants he's got on!"³² The stunning climax of the act involves a brawl in which the villain attacks the heroine. Barney and Berry take advantage of the mayhem to complete their humiliation of Gee Ho. In a moment of obvious pride, Barney rips off Gee Ho's pants and holds them up in the air, shouting, "I've got the

³¹ Dumont, *Little* 24-25.

³² Dumont, *Little* 31-32.

pants!"³³ Thus, Barney has visibly emasculated Gee Ho. The Irishman in *Little Miss Nobody* has declared himself and proven himself to be stronger than the Chinese man, and he has made it painfully clear to Gee Ho that the Chinaman will *not* be wearing the pants as long as an Irishman is around to put things in their proper order. Thus while Barney and Berry live in a world in which they can never achieve the status of the hero, they are able to claim ownership of a piece of authority by ganging up on a man of even lower social worth.

The physical comedy in *The Golden Gulch* also results in a clear ranking of the characters' strength and courage. The list of characters in *The Golden Gulch* includes virtually every "type" character known to frontier melodrama: Fergus O'Gooligan (the Irishman), Chummy Litewaite (the "New York Blossom"), One Lung (the Chinese servant), Senator Juniper Toots (a "political coon"), Ikey Einstein ("a Jew Peddler"), Old Magnus ("a Degenerate Indian"), and a collection of white men and women. Many of these "type" characters find themselves trying to prove themselves better than the next guy.

Because so many of these characters participate in fights with more than one person, they play begins to read like a twisted logic problem from a standardized test: If Mrs. Naggle beats up One Lung, Old Magnus beats up Chummy but not Matilda, Chummy beats up One Lung but not Jessica, and Frank beats up Old Magnus, who is the strongest? This "battle for supremacy" both reflects and perpetuates the accepted definition of what it means to be an American; for the answer to this standardized question is equally standardized:

- 1) Non-Irish white men
- 2) Irish men and white women
- 3) Black man
- 4) Indian man

³³ Dumont, *Little* 34.

5) East coast wimp

6) Chinese servant

The only surprising component in this ranking is that of Chummy, the east coast wimp, who ranks just above the Chinese servant. At first glance, Chummy's presence might seem to upset the notion of a hierarchy in which white men are on top. However, it is important to remember that frontier dramas frequently present a vision of the frontier as a "wild" land governed by common folks and not influenced by the highfalutin policies of Washington, D.C. At the time this play was written and performed, debate on The Chinese Problem was still heated, and Congress was voting on whether to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act. Thus, Chummy represents those east-coasters who felt they had a right to impose their views upon the frontier. Viewed in this light, it makes sense for Chummy to be portrayed as a wimp.

Even so, Chummy is shown to be superior in strength to the Chinese laborer. Despite having been easily beaten up and/or threatened by the villains, the Native American, and the Black character, Chummy handily knocks out One Lung, who is labeled with a particularly popular name for Chinese characters, perhaps because of its obvious implication that the Chinese character is less than completely human:

CHUMMY. Get out, you yellow beggah.

ONE LUNG. Whatee? (*Dances about.*) Calee names? Come on, me puttee head on you. (*Rushes at Chummy*).

CHUMMY. (*knocks him down*) Take that, bah Jove!

ONE LUNG. Oh! (*Rises, holding jaw.*) Me gettee fooled. Dudee hittee all heap same like mulee kick. Jaw all bustee.

CHUMMY. I say – don't you want to fight?

ONE LUNG. Not muchee. You knockee Chinaman's head off.

.....
CHUMMY. Yaas. I'm really quite a sluggah after all, bah Jove I am.³⁴

³⁴ Townsend 18-19.

One Lung runs off stage in pain, holding his broken jaw. Chummy, with an inflated sense of self, eagerly enters into a poker game with violent men whom he has been warned to avoid. By allowing the puny Chummy Litewaite to easily overcome One Lung, Townsend has clearly shown the Chinese character to be the weakest. As if it weren't bad enough to find oneself at the bottom of the Frontier Chain of Being, poor One Lung suffers yet another humiliation when, after the villain has been tied up by the hero, One Lung is granted the opportunity to kick the villain. Thus, the Chinese character is allowed to show "manly" behavior only when such behavior has little consequence.

Wax Works At Play also utilizes physical humor to formalize a pecking order among minority characters. As part of Mr. Pattern's practical joke on his Black servant, Mat, he has arranged for his friends to act like life-size wax figures such as "Cupid," "Longfellow," and "George Washington." At the end of the play, as Wing Fat arrives once again to collect the laundry, Mat decides once and for all that he will get rid of Wing Fat so that his girlfriend, Lulu, can have the laundry job. After all, he says, Blacks are Americans while the Chinese are not. When Wing Fat does not give up easily, Mat approaches the figure of "George Washington" and grabs his hatchet. He charges at Wing Fat and uses President Washington's hatchet to cut off Wing Fat's queue. Wing Fat screams in agony and collapses. He has been emasculated – castrated, if you will – by the hatchet of the most famous founding father of the United States. As the scene comes to an end, Mr. Pattern has reclaimed his studio, Mat and Lulu have jobs, and Wing Fat is stripped of his queue and his dignity. Once more, the hierarchy has been maintained.

Significantly, the playwright notes on the list of characters that while Mat and Lulu are written as blackface characters, a company may choose to play them as dialect characters, such

as Irish, Dutch, or some other ethnicity. Such "flexibility" in casting may be due, in part, to a desire to allow companies to cater the script to the specific skills of their performers as well as to the particular interests of their intended audience. While this "casting note" is unusual among the scripts considered for this study, it may not be atypical among the lesser-known minstrel scripts of the late nineteenth century, many of which have been lost. Regardless of the flexibility surrounding the main characters, Wing Fat must always be played as a Chinese character. Thus – given the outcome of the play and the potential for Mat and Lulu to be Black, Irish, Dutch, Jewish, Italian, etc – Wing Fat is placed below every other immigrant or minority class in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

Whether through name-calling, inter-racial flirtation, or physical comedy, minority characters in nineteenth-century music and drama participate in and disseminate a widely accepted definition of "American" as "white." Since the top rankings are claimed by white men and women, there is nothing left for these minority characters but to fight one another for the next highest position. The resulting antagonism between minority characters occupies the bulk of their time on stage, serves to dispel any potential for collective resistance, and reinforces for the audience that the hierarchy they've bought into is in their best interest. This antagonistic relationship between minority characters in nineteenth-century music and drama also fueled antagonistic relationships offstage, particularly in the realm of the work force, where white bosses were all too happy to have their workers unable to get along with one another long enough to unionize against robber barons who were born during the railroad boom.

Minority Authors and Artists Participate In Ethnic Jockeying

Antagonistic interactions between minorities in nineteenth-century popular entertainment were not limited to fictional representations; in fact, several Irish and Black entertainers created

and/or performed songs and vaudeville acts in which they attempted to establish their position above other ethnic groups.

Many Irish songwriters wrote anthems in support of Kearney and the Workingmen's Party of California. Performed at Buckley's Varieties in San Francisco, "Twelve Hundred More" exemplifies the anti-Chinese rhetoric employed by the Workingmen.

O, workingman dear, and did you hear
The news that's goin' round?
Another China steamer
Has been landed here in town.
.....
Twelve hundred honest laboring men
Thrown out of work to-day
By the landing of these Chinamen
In San Francisco Bay.

The song references the popular belief that Chinese men were stealing jobs from Irish women, who were then forced into a life of prostitution:

Twelve hundred pure and lovely girls,
In the papers I have read,
Must barter away their virtue
To get a crust of bread.

The song ends with the promise that an "avenging cry" will be heard throughout the state:
"Drive out the Chinaman!"³⁵

Will Pierce's "One And All; or, 'Chinaman Must Go'" is an obvious reference to the central motto of the Workingmen. The Chinese men in this song are not presented as rat-eating, inept fools; rather they are referenced only in regards to cheap labor. Instead of focusing on the "Chinaman's" bizarre traits, this song and others like it focus on the need for white men across the nation – even in the east – to rally against the Chinese:

Then spread the banner of the free,
Our own red, white and blue,

³⁵ Hugh Robinson, "Twelve Hundred More," (San Francisco: Bell, n.d.).

Let one and all from sea to sea,
Unto the cause be true,
Oppression stares us in the face,
'Tis time to strike the blow,
So rally free men brave and true –
The Chinamen must go.³⁶

Ironically, the song urges "one and all" to unite "from sea to sea" yet clearly advocates the expulsion of an entire ethnic group. This rhetoric of unity reveals that Chinese men do not fit into the Workingmen's definition of "one," "all," "free," or "American."

"Twelve Hundred More" and "One and All" are songs written by Irish musicians and sung by Irish narrators. "Song of the Tartar Horse," by famous Irish poet Daniel O'Connell, accomplishes its anti-Chinese task through a Chinese narrator who brags that the Chinese will take over the United States:

We are bringing tainted women; we are bringing foul disease;
We will make a second China by your pleasant western seas.
.....
We'll monopolize and master every craft upon your shore,
And we'll starve you out with fifty – aye, five hundred thousand more!³⁷

Interestingly, while a Chinese man is the narrator of the song, he does not employ pidgin English. Rather, he speaks very clearly and eloquently. Once more, Irish songwriters do not dismiss the Chinese by portraying them as childlike, incompetent fools; instead, they strengthen their anti-Chinese argument by acknowledging that Chinese laborers *could* do all of their jobs and for less. Despite the recognition Irish songwriters show to the abilities of Chinese laborers, they still clearly rank themselves above Chinese laborers. They write and sing from the assumption that Irish immigrant workers – being white – deserve jobs and a life in America more

³⁶ Will H. Pierce, "One and All; or, 'Chinamen Must Go,'" (San Francisco: California Music, 1878).

³⁷ William Purviance Fenn, *Ah Sin and His Brethren In American Literature* (California: College of Chinese Studies, 1933).

than do Chinese immigrants (and even Chinese men who had been in the United States longer than some Irishmen).

In one case, an Irish songwriter appropriated the legend of a famous Mormon entrepreneur, Sam Brannan. The song, entitled "Sam Brannan," includes a verse in which Sam is said to have opposed "the Chinese curse" and ends with a cry to end Chinese immigration in honor of Sam:

The Chinese curse that's o'er the land,
Sam Brannan would remove,
And give a chance to a working man,
And the rights of white labor prove.
The pig-tail race must be kept away,
From our fair and golden shore;
T'will be for us all a happy day
When we'll have no Chinamen more.³⁸

Whether or not Sam Brannan and other Mormons opposed Chinese immigration, this song assigns anti-Chinese rhetoric to a legendary Mormon.

In "That Coon Republic Out in China," by Bryan and Robinson, the Irish songwriters employ a blackface narrator to spew anti-Chinese rhetoric. In this song, the Black character describes a plan to relocate African Americans to China. As the man's plan unfolds, it becomes clear once more that the Irish songwriter shows little respect to either the Black narrator or to the Chinese race he describes:

The Coontown guards have formed a plan to free the colored race,
For in the white man's land the coon's a little out of place.
We're going to move to China and the natives we will chase
.....
When we start that Coon Republic out in China.
.....
We'll get them by their pigtails and we'll tie them up in groups
Then we're going to ship them out to Asia Minor.³⁹

³⁸ C. Boland, "Sam Brannan" (San Francisco: Bell, n.d.).

³⁹ Bryan and Robinson. "That Coon Republic Out in China." (Morse Music, 1900).

Whether in his own voice or in the voice of an ethnic minority, the Irish songwriter echoed Kearney's anti-Chinese rhetoric. That these songs do not emphasize traits that are exaggerated in the Stage Chinaman (i.e., pidgin, diet, cheating at cards) does not imply that Irish songwriters thought more highly of the Chinese than did non-Irish writers. Rather, the absence of "silliness" stresses the extreme risk that many Irish felt from the impending "Mongolian Invasion." By abandoning the comic Stage Chinaman in favor of an intelligent, skillful Chinese laborer, Irish songwriters rallied the troops to do more than merely laugh at the Chinese in the theatre; these songs urged Irish and, indeed, all white Americans to unite against a common enemy.

The Irish were not alone in their use of popular entertainment to ridicule other ethnic groups, specifically the Chinese. Krystyn Moon notes that as early as the 1870s there were a number of African Americans who performed Chinese caricatures:

From the 1890s through the 1920s there were several African-American Chinese impersonators in vaudeville, many of whom made their careers by being Chinese on the stage. The duos Tom Brown and Siren Nevarro, George Catlin and Bob Kelly, and Sam Cook and Jim Stevens impersonated Chinese immigrants.⁴⁰

Catlin and Kelly, in particular, had much success performing a skit in which one man was a Chinese character and the other a Black character. "The Coon and the Chink" was their most popular sketch and was part of their repertoire for nearly ten years. It is unclear whether a sketch entitled "The Coon and the Chink," written by Walter Carter and published in 1912, is the same sketch used by Catlin and Kelly. However, due to the timing of the sketch's publication and the popularity of Catlin and Kelly's act, it is certainly possible that they are one and the same; at the very least, it is likely that there are some similarities.

⁴⁰ Krystyn R. Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850-1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005) 133-134.

Carter's "The Coon and the Chink" takes place in a Chinese laundry. The "Coon" has entered to pick up his laundry, but he does not have his ticket. "You no gottie tickie you no gettie laundry," replies the "Chink." The Black man is able to trick the Chinese laundryman into giving him clothes without a ticket. The sketch is full of typical vaudeville humor: at one point, "Coon" dips into a bowl of chop suey that "Chink" offers him, only to pull out a set of false teeth and a giant hairpin. The two men share banter in which the "Coon" suggests that the two of them take their show on the road; he contacts his imaginary manager, who refuses to hire a Chinaman, even if he came for free. The sketch is certainly silly and does not have much of a plot. It does, however, participate in a political debate about cheap Chinese labor and about the intelligence and gullibility of Chinese men. For at the end of the sketch, after the imaginary manager has informed the "Chink" that he would not be paid for his participation in a show that would likely gross \$2000 per night, the "Coon" assures the manager that they'll be happy to take the act on the road under those terms. The "Coon" and the "Chink" join together in song and dance, the "Chink" dancing because he doesn't know any better, and the "Coon" dancing because he just tricked the "Chink" into entering into a partnership without getting any of the profits.

There are also, however, examples of plays and songs written by minorities that appear to model cooperation among ethnic groups. Although not set in the frontier, the musicals of Harrigan and Hart were wildly popular and were influential in the development of musical comedy and of ethnic characters on the stage. Irishman Edward Harrigan worked closely with his Jewish father-in-law, composer David Braham, to create some of the most popular musicals in the second half of the nineteenth century. Harrigan also collaborated with Tony Hart; together the two performed dozens of comic musicals, with Harrigan frequently portraying the Irish adventurer Dan Mulligan while Hart donned blackface for his recurring role as the Negro wench

Rebecca Allup.⁴¹ Harrigan's stories were primarily set in New York City and explored the lives of immigrants trying to survive in the city. A number of ethnic minorities are represented in these musicals, including Irish, Dutch, Jewish, African-American, and Chinese. For the most part, these ethnic groups manage to get along in their struggle against the upper class.

"McNalley's Row of Flats" (1882) reflects the spirit of camaraderie:

It's Ireland and Italy, Jerusalem and Germany
Oh, Chinamen and nagers, and a paradise for cats,
All jumbled up together in the snow or rainy weather,
They represent the tenants in McNally's row of flats.⁴²

While it's true that many of the characters – Irish, Jewish, Black, and German – sing about getting along with all ethnic groups, the ethnic characters nevertheless demonstrate a hierarchy. For, as Donald E. Whittaker notes, "singing is, after all, the currency by which characters on the musical stage negotiate their positions."⁴³ And, unlike other ethnic characters, the Chinese immigrants in Harrigan's musicals – frequently laundrymen – are not granted the opportunity to sing. In his recent compilation of the works by Harrigan and Braham, Jon W. Firson notes that while "everybody gets along," not everybody is treated equally: "While the Irish, and to a lesser extent African Americans and Jewish Americans, are afforded some depth of characterization in Harrigan and Braham's output, this cannot be said of the remaining ethnic groups that pepper his urban landscape."⁴⁴ Despite positive relationships between Irish, Black, and Jewish citizens, then, the musicals of Harrigan and Hart do not significantly disrupt the hierarchy of ethnic minorities reflected and encouraged in plays and songs across the country in the nineteenth century.

⁴¹ Don B. Wilmet with Tice L. Miller, eds., *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 184.

⁴² Edward Harrigan, "McNally's Row of Flats," 1882, *Edward Harrigan and David Braham: Collected Songs, I: 1873-1882*, ed. Jon W. Firson (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1997) 16.

⁴³ Donald Elgan Whittaker, "Subversive Aspects of American Musical Theatre," Diss., Louisiana State U, 2002, 29.

⁴⁴ Firson xxxi.

Thus, white musicians, playwrights, and entertainers were not alone in employing ethnic jockeying that supported an existent ideology of "white" America; Irish and Black performers also participated in the perpetuation of a hierarchy of (in)humanity, assuring that ethnic groups would remain strictly divided and strictly cut off from the promises of Unity symbolized by the era of railroad construction.

Ethnic Jockeying in the Audience

Because it is unclear when and where many of these plays and minstrel acts were performed, it is difficult to determine the make-up of the audiences attending the performances. We cannot know, for example, whether the audience cheered the Irishman, Barney, as he ripped the pants off of Gee Ho during the climactic scene in *Little Miss Nobody*. Nor can we know if audience members themselves hurled insults to ethnic characters onstage.

One specific example of audience behavior does exist, however. In 1863, a Nevada theatre company presented *Mazeppa*, or more specifically, a parody of the sensation drama that was being performed by Adah Menken in San Francisco. The Nevada performance was produced by Pat Holland at Topliffe's as one of the first productions in the newly reopened melodeon hall. According to newspaper accounts, Holland "borrowed the famous ass belonging to one of the Celestials" that lived in the area. The audience loved the performance and laughed at the thought that the local Chinese immigrants were missing their mule. The drama of opening night was overshadowed, however, by the drama that happened the next day. Historian Margaret Watson describes the ensuing commotion in her 1964 study of Nevada's theatre scene in the mining era. Watson's account of the event is sprinkled with quotes from an article in the 3 November 1863 edition of the *Virginia Evening Bulletin*:

Chinatown inhabitants, pigtailed bobbing in anger, sought Officer Downey, who with little difficulty "tracked the missing quadruped" to the melodeon on C Street.

But Holland was not inclined to part with the "borrowed" creature of such "gifted sag-ass-ity" until *Mazeppa* should be "played out." The Chinamen vowed they would take their donkey off the stage. The "likelihood of a very pretty muss among the Mongolians, Mongrels and all kinds of mortality" brought out greater crowds to Topliffe's on following nights.⁴⁵

Clearly, the producer, the performers, and the audience all felt that they had every right to steal the Chinese immigrants' donkey for their performance of a play that contained stereotypical Stage Chinamen. The fact that the audiences grew with the probability of a violent melee in which the white audience could watch and participate in physical attacks against the local Chinese laborers suggests that watching the Chinese be "put in their place" was a fun pastime, whether the action was on stage or in the audience.

Resistant Images: Cooperation and Friendship

Despite an abundance of examples of ethnic bickering in-nineteenth century popular entertainment, there are moments of resistance. These moments are not representations of utopias; stereotypes and name-calling remain constant factors. Yet in George Myles' *The Winning Hand; or, The Imposter* and in Moore's *Poverty Flats* Irish and Chinese characters are shown, ultimately, to be friends – or at least as close to friends as was possible for an Irishman and a Chinaman in the 1890s.

George B. Myles' play, *The Winning Hand*, received a run at Proctor's Novelty Theatre in 1890⁴⁶; it is unknown where else the play was performed. *The Winning Hand* tells the story of Dick Stonestreet and Ida Barnard and their quest to marry one another despite an escaped convict's scheme to steal Ida for himself. Yet much of the action involves Irish and Chinese characters: Jerry Fagin, Kitty Malone, and One Lung. Mr. Barnard introduces One Lung into the scene at the start of the play, having just hired him as a cook. Barnard encourages the

⁴⁵ Margaret G. Watson, *Silver Theatre: Amusements of Nevada's Mining Frontier, 1850-1864* (Glendale, CA: Clark, 1964) 215.

⁴⁶ Odell, *Annals*. See vol. 14 (p 759).

Chinese and Irish characters to cooperate, saying "I hope you will become good friends."

Initially, Jerry does not particularly like the prospect of befriending a Chinaman. He agrees to show One Lung the ropes, however, primarily because he senses that it might be of benefit to him to have a minion. He insists that One Lung call him "Jerry Fagin, Esquire, of County Kerry," but One Lung prefers "Jelly." From this point on, Jerry and One Lung have an unstated partnership in which One Lung does much of the work and in exchange One Lung can expect Jerry to offer some protection from bullies:

JERRY. I'll shake wid ye, me pig tail brother, for I think I can use ye. . . .
so now I leave ye to attend me duties.

ONE LUNG. Hi! Litty One Lung be Jelly's partner, litty One Lung
stickee to Jelly; Jelly no lettee bad litty boy, pulle pig tail an' hollee rats
at litty One Lung.⁴⁷

Despite the initial *quid pro quo* nature of their friendship, Jerry and One Lung eventually develop and exhibit mutual affection. One Lung even helps Jerry woo Kitty. And when One Lung fears that he has been fired, he voices a sad goodbye to his friend, Jerry: "Me solly leab you, Jelly, you litty One Lung flind."⁴⁸ While it is true that One Lung and Jerry exhibit many stereotypical traits, they also model a genuine friendship between members of two different ethnicities.

A similar friendship develops in *Poverty Flats*, a frontier melodrama in which the villains frame the hero for murder and the hero is ultimately proven innocent. This "typical" frontier drama is atypical in the way its Irish and Chinese characters are treated by their bosses and by each other. From the beginning of the play, the audience gets the sense that Martin, the patriarch of the community, trusts and relies upon his servants, regardless of their ethnicity. He even entrusts his daughter's care to Dan (the Irishman) and Win Lung (the Chinaman) when he races

⁴⁷ George B. Myles, *The Winning Hand; or, The Imposter* (Clyde, OH: Ames, 1895) 6.

⁴⁸ Myles 22.

off to a potential crime scene. As the plot progresses, Dan and Win are both seen participating in courageous acts; Win even shoots and kills the villain!

Yet what is most unusual about *Poverty Flats* is the relationship that is built up between Dan and Win Lung. The two constantly tease one another, and even articulate popular anti-Chinese or anti-Irish political rhetoric of the day. Win accuses all Irish of being politicians. To further pester Dan, Win announces that he will vie for the hand of the gal Dan's had his eye on. Dan does not take well to the "friendly" competition:

DAN. Do you think fer wan minute that Biddy Houlahan, the queen of Poverty Flats, would marry ye? Why, my bye, ye are dreamin'. Go back an' take another crack at the pipe.⁴⁹

Yet, although Dan's words are mean, they are sandwiched within a conversation that begins and ends with Win and Dan expressing their respect for one another. Dan even calls Win "me hathen frind" and asserts that it is "too dom bad ye are not an Irishman, and ye'd be a credit to the Irish nation."⁵⁰ Not only does Dan consider Win a friend, he also esteems him high enough to believe that Win is not just a good *Chinaman* but a good *man*, worthy of being called Irish, which is the biggest compliment Dan has to offer.

Interestingly, Dan and Win Lung are not the only characters who comment on their friendship. After Dan's lawyering and Win's testimony successfully acquit the hero of murder charges, Marion (the heroine) joins the hero in a thankful conversation.

JIM. If it hadn't been for Win Lung, my days on this earth would have been numbered.

MARION. You are right, James. And we should never be tired of returning thanks to Win Lung and the land he came from.

JIM. I tell you what it is, Marion, I will never again believe the heathen Chinees are as simple as they look. When it comes to downright

⁴⁹ Bernard Francis Moore, *Poverty Flats* (Boston: Baker, 1899) 29.

⁵⁰ Moore 28.

common sense, I'll back Win Lung against any man in the camp, bar none.
MARION. (*laughs*) For once in the history of the world Ireland and China formed too strong a combination for a native born Yankee.⁵¹

The idea that an Irishman and a Chinaman could join forces to defeat an "American" clearly proved a thought far too dangerous to leave uncensored, for the stage directions indicate that Marion "quickly" qualifies her potentially explosive statement: "But in this case the Yankee was a scoundrel instead of an honest man." Yes, Jim and Marion are grateful to Dan and Win Lung for their assistance in freeing Jim, but not even progressive thinkers like Jim and Marion are prepared to consider the possibility that minority groups could unite to overcome "honest" white Americans.

Conclusion

The inter-racial friendships exhibited in *The Winning Hand* and in *Poverty Flats* offer evidence that political attitudes were not universal in the 1890s, when these plays were written and produced. Yet these two resistant images are overshadowed by the countless examples of minority characters doing harm to other minority characters in an effort to secure a higher rung on the social ladder. By including scenes and narratives of ethnic jockeying, nineteenth-century musicians, writers, and performers reflected and fueled an atmosphere of antagonism between ethnic groups. This antagonism allowed white entrepreneurs to continue to take advantage of minority labor, as they had done during the construction of the transcontinental railroad, and as they would continue to do as tracks were laid throughout the western United States. Ironically, the "unity" granted Americans by the railroad was sustained by an effort to maintain *disunity* among minorities who might otherwise upset the vision of "America" held by those who were in power.

⁵¹ Moore 26.

Chapter 5

Selling the “Old West”: The Negotiation of Nostalgia and Guilt in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Performances of the Railroad and the American Frontier

"People like they historical shit in a certain way," says Lincoln, in Suzan-Lori Parks' 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Topdog/Underdog*. "They want it to unfold the way they folded it up. Neatly like a book. Not raggedy and bloody and screaming."¹ In this statement, Lincoln, an African-American Abe Lincoln impersonator, reiterates the very questions of history posed by Peter Burke: should the historian honor a society's glorious deeds and neatly record the feats as Herodotus would? Or should the historian act as a Remembrancer, bringing to light the skeletons, the "raggedy and bloody and screaming" secrets from the past? Lincoln's job as a Lincoln impersonator requires an audience who is willing to pay for the chance to see "history come alive." As Lincoln astutely observes, however, people like to see history "in a certain way." The implication is that if history is presented in a *different* way, the public might not buy it – literally or figuratively. Thus, Lincoln has summed up the challenge facing today's historian: how does one write a version of history that is "neat" enough to sell, but also "raggedy and bloody" enough to ease the historian's conscience?

In order to answer that question, one must consider the three individual components of the equation: the historian, the consumer, and the history. Each of these terms has been complicated and their definitions muddled over the past several decades, making it difficult to observe the negotiations that take place between and among the three. Yet the three components are there, as they always have been, informing our understanding of history, our packaging of history, and our willingness to "buy" history.

¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, *Topdog/Underdog*, (New York: Dramatists, 1999) 57.

Up to this point, I have focused exclusively on nineteenth and early twentieth-century performative accounts of the railroad and the laborers who built it. I have discussed the use of popular entertainment in the scripting of a history of the railroad, emphasizing the ways in which the prevailing ideology shapes a society's understanding of itself and its place in history. In this chapter, I shift my focus away from the "scripting" of history through nineteenth-century performance; here I am interested in exploring the ways that contemporary performance "re-scripts" the history originally recorded by artists and historians who lived more than one hundred years ago. By looking at twentieth and twenty-first century performances of the railroad era, the historian can observe how the historical narrative has changed as historians and historiography have changed. For just as nineteenth-century accounts of railroad history were shaped by a specific ideology, so are contemporary performances of that era reflective of our current understanding of unity, of historical guilt, and of the role of diversity within a Union. Each historian, student, artist, and consumer has an idea of what unity and history should look like. As such, these players participate in a negotiation between history and commerce that results in a performance of history that – like that in the nineteenth century – distorts the reality of the economic, social, racial, and symbolic impacts of the railroad in the nineteenth century. In effect, the "history" constructed by twentieth and twenty-first century museums, television shows, cartoons, and plays is market-driven. The market is, in turn, alternately fueled by nostalgia, guilt, or a complex hybrid of the two. The "performances" of the railroad and frontier history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, then, are characteristic of any other market-driven product: they are designed for mass-production, easily reproduced, and at least partially reliant on generalizations and stereotypes.

Nineteenth-century performative accounts of the railroad were marked by absence, by an erasure of laborers, particularly Chinese laborers. Twentieth and twenty-first century performances do not necessarily offer a different perspective. Performances that are primarily located in nostalgia-driven markets occasionally accept and/or perpetuate that absence. Other performances, particularly those that deal with the cultural guilt of past injustices, attempt to rectify the absence of ethnic laborers, to make these workers “present” in history. Because they are economically and politically driven, however, these attempts to “correct” railroad history often offer a snapshot of the railroad that ultimately replaces one generalization with another; that is, while Chinese laborers are not “absent” in twentieth and twenty-first century accounts of the railroad, they are also not entirely “present.” In an effort to correct the oversights of previous generations, the ethnic laborers’ “presence” is emphasized, brought to the foreground. In this new photographic image, the re-inserted faces of identical Chinese laborers are blurred by the intense, corrective light that shines upon them. These Chinese workers are “presented,” offered up to the consumer as heroic, accomplished, and efficient workers, yet workers who lack individuality. Whether by perpetuating an absence of ethnic labor, by over-emphasizing ethnic contributions, or by failing to consider the multi-layered experiences of nineteenth-century ethnic laborers, twentieth and twenty-first century performative accounts of the railroad offer a narrative of railroad history that continues to rely on generalizations. Such generalizations are easy to invoke in an effort to craft a unified and accessible historical account; yet these generalizations invariably omit one or more characters from the story, further excluding them from the unity offered in the narrative.

It is especially important to consider the economic and political influences that fuel our performances of history when we consider the unique role of performance in the dissemination

and canonization of history. As Freddie Rokem notes in his book, *Performing History*, history does not really become “history” until it is presented in a reproducible form:

History can only be perceived as such when it becomes recapitulated, when we create some form of discourse, like the theatre, on the basis of which an organized repetition of the past is constructed, situating the chaotic torrents of the past within an aesthetic frame.²

It is, of course, possible to construct history outside of the world of performance; textual accounts of history have indeed attempted this feat for centuries. Yet the performance of a historical moment – the embodiment of the past – clearly offers a uniquely powerful and communal transmission of history. Reminiscent of the storyteller of ancient times who performed a peoples’ past with words, movement, and body language, performative accounts of history beg to be remembered, to be re-told, to become part of our nation’s oral and visual history.

Combining this age-old tradition of “oral history” with the New Historicist practice of recuperative, multi-dimensional, and self-reflexive historiography, twentieth and twenty-first century performances of railroad history can be crafted as a simultaneous “performance” and “critique” of history. The resulting historical narrative thus offers its audience a specific version of history whose performative components make it particularly convincing. Kalle Pihlainen remarks on this characteristic of performative accounts of history in a recent issue of *Rethinking History*:

Performance can transcend the boundaries separating the private from the public. Appealing to our sense-perceptions as well as to our imagination, performances have the ability to convey interpretations so powerfully that they obscure or at least shape the idiosyncratic views held by individual members of the audience. In

² Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2000) xi.

this way, besides being a potentially strong force for social change, theatrical performances have a unifying effect.³

Pihlainen believes that performance has a power to transform an audience with diverse understandings of a historical moment into a unified group of people with a common interpretation of historical events; it is this “power of performance” that mandates a constant examination of twentieth and twenty-first century performative accounts of history. For, as Pihlainen points out, “Presenting performance as a tool for (any) political purposes thus subjects it to questions regarding the ways in which it can assume social and political responsibility without unintentionally affirming existing value-structures.”⁴ Thus, it is potentially dangerous to attempt to “correct” a history of the railroad through performance; the artist who attempts to perform railroad history must walk a dangerous line between reproducing earlier caricatures and creating new stereotypes, stereotypes that are equally grounded in a hierarchy that the well-meaning artist may be attempting to critique.

Nevertheless, musical, theatrical, and artistic performances of railroad history present an opportunity to consider multiple points of view, multiple experiences. Rokem indicates that performance “enabl[es] the dead heroes from the past to reappear.”⁵ In the case of twentieth and twenty-first century performances of railroad history, performance can enable the absent and ignored dead heroes from the past to appear for the first time. That this goal is difficult to achieve without perpetuating or creating stereotypes does not necessarily make the effort a lost cause. In the following pages, I will examine several types of contemporary performance that engage the topic of nineteenth-century railroads and the American frontier. Performances of railroad history are not limited to the stage; in fact, other than in a specific genre of “western

³ Pihlainen, Kalle, “Of Closure and Convention: Surpassing Representation Through Performance and the Referential,” *Rethinking History* 6.2 (2002): 179-200.

⁴ Pihlainen 181.

⁵ Rokem 6.

melodramas” nineteenth-century railroads are more often seen in film than in plays. Whereas “popular entertainment” in the nineteenth century was most commonly available in theatres, variety halls, and serial publications, twentieth and twenty-first century entertainment finds its largest audiences over the television airwaves and in movie theatres. Contemporary plays offer a version of history that is seen by a select audience. Television and films, however, reach a much larger audience and have an increased potential to shape our understanding of history. Museums and reenactments, too, offer performative accounts of railroad history that are not only consumed by larger audiences than plays but are also more likely to be received as “gospel truth” because of the widely-accepted “authority” of the museum. At first glance, it might seem a stretch to include museum exhibits in a discussion of “performance” of history; yet as Rosemarie Bank and others have argued, the physical, spatial, and aesthetic construction of a museum certainly offers visitors an interactive, sensory encounter with history. Museums offer visual, tactile, and aural images of the past; as such, they can be viewed as performative and participatory experiences. Thus, in addition to more traditional performance forms such as melodrama, plays, and film, I will be considering the (re)scripting of history by railroad museums and reenactors. Some of these performances propagate a distorted understanding of minority laborers while others create new stereotypes by homogenizing these ethnic laborers as identical in their heroism and experience. Yet, through the power of performance, all of these performative histories ask their audiences to care about the past. “The theatre ‘performing history,’ Rokem maintains, “seeks to overcome both the separation and the exclusion from the past, striving to create a community where the events from this past will matter again.”⁶

⁶ Rokem *xii*.

All Aboard for Melodrama: Boos, Hisses, and a Campy Way to Make a Buck

Historian Bryan J. Wolf notes that "[t]he settling of the West blurs with the selling of the West."⁷ Perhaps nowhere is this "selling of the West" more visible than in the dozens of tourist attractions throughout the western United States, including several railroad companies featuring rides on an "old-fashioned" locomotive. The following advertisement for the Mt. Hood Railroad is typical of the opportunities available for the history-minded tourist:

Hold on to your valuables as train robbers stop the train and come looking for loot. Enjoy country music and a skit in the park during the layover. A barbecue is available for purchase.⁸

A similar event is offered by the Yosemite Mountain Sugar Pine Railroad – located in the heart of one of the nation's most visited National Parks. It features an event called the "Melodrama Evening," which begins with a delicious steak and barbecue dinner. Then it's "All Aboard for the Logger Steam Train excursion through the woods as the conductor's narration recalls the past when loggers and shay steam engines ruled the woods."⁹ During a layover, patrons are treated to a performance of a melodrama in the woods before the train returns to the station "under the stars." Past years have featured such classic contemporary "old west" melodramas as *Run to the Roundhouse*, *Nellie (He Can't Corner You There)*. Promising "old west" entertainment and a ride on an "old-fashioned" locomotive, the Railroad companies' ads drip with nostalgic images and phrases. In many ways, the Yosemite Mountain Sugar Pine Railroad's "Melodrama Evening" is a good example of the negotiation of history and commerce – the "marketing" of history. For while the owners and operators of this and other tourist railroads certainly want to keep alive the history of the "Era of the Railroad," they also aim to make money.

⁷ Bryan J. Wolf, "How the West Was Hung; or, When I Hear the Word 'Culture' I Take Out My Checkbook," *American Quarterly* 44.3 (1992): 418-438.

⁸ "Mount Hood Railroad 2006 Special Events Calendar." <www.mthoodrr.com/events.html>.

⁹ "YMSPRR Events." <www.ymsprr.com/events.html>.

The melodramas so often featured in events like the "Melodrama Evening" are also designed to be moneymaking endeavors for the amateur theatre companies that produce them. The playwrights who script the contemporary "old-fashioned melodramas" do not expect to see their works performed on Broadway; instead, their works are produced by high schools, community theatres, and church groups. A large number of these contemporary melodramas are set in the frontier; some of them contain the always sensational "railroad scene." Due to their immense popularity and their treatment of the same topics found in nineteenth century frontier melodramas, an examination of these new melodramas might reveal how much (or little) has changed since the first days of "the railroad play." Four plays, in particular, feature a railroad sequence very similar to those featured in *Under the Gaslight* and *The Main Line*: 1) *Love Rides the Rails; or, Will the Mail Train Run Tonight?* (1940); 2) *Run to the Roundhouse, Nellie (He Can't Corner You There)* (1973); 3) *Tied to the Tracks* (1985); and 4) *Lurking on the Railroad; or, Will She Give Him a Wide Berth?* (1987). The popularity of these, and similar melodramas, is undeniable; Pioneer Drama Service, which houses the rights to *Tied to the Tracks*, records over 350 performances of the play since 1993, with many more than that since its initial publication in 1985.¹⁰

Love Rides the Rails, by Morland Cary, is the oldest of the well-known modern railroad melodramas, published in 1940. The sensational train scene is primarily played for comic effect; the train is actually painted on a backdrop, and when a character is "thrown under the train," he is literally tossed underneath the curtain. Yet, despite the decidedly comic tone, the play's "railroad scene" is nearly identical to that in *Gaslight*. The hero is tied to the tracks by a duo of sneaky

¹⁰ Michael Glassman, E-mail to author, 7 October 2005.

villains who are trying to steal his railroad company from him. Their plot is foiled, of course, when the plucky heroine frees the hero from the oncoming train.¹¹

A very interesting and significant change happens to the "railroad melodrama" in Shubert Fendrich's 1973 classic, *Run to the Roundhouse, Nellie*. In this play, it is not the hero who is tied to the tracks; rather it is the heroine. The female character is tied to the tracks by the villain, Hugo Swindle, and is saved from a certain death by the hero, Sterling Worth.¹² This gender reversal is particularly interesting given the rise of the women's movement at that time in American history.

The gender switch stuck. The next railroad melodrama to appear on the scene was *Tied to the Tracks*, a musical by Tim Kelly, Arne Christiansen, and Ole Kittleson. This musical debuted in 1985 and has been adapted into a play and a shorter musical, respectively entitled *The Snake in the Grass* and *Rogue of the Railway; Or, Should He Free Her or Knot?* The titles of these melodramas reflect the campiness that has pervaded the old-fashioned melodrama in the current era. Once again, *Tied to the Tracks* finds the heroine tied to the tracks by the villain and rescued by the hero. The sensational railroad scene is accomplished primarily with sound effects and lighting. The lead playwright, Tim Kelly, notes in the script's "production notes" that the railroad scene "will prove the highlight of the entertainment."¹³ His description of how the scene should progress could not be more masculine (or heterosexual) in structure: "The louder the sound effects, the better. Some reflecting metal on the engine façade will catch the light. Don't rush it. Build, build, build until the moment when Billy leaps in and saves the day."

The most recent of melodramas involving the railroad deviates from the standard "railroad play" in that no character is tied to the tracks. Rather, the climactic scene of *Lurking on*

¹¹ Morland Cary, *Love Rides the Rails; Or, Will the Mail Train Run Tonight* (New York: Dramatists, 1940).

¹² Shubert Hendrich, *Run to the Roundhouse, Nellie (He Can't Corner You There)* (Denver: Pioneer, 1973).

¹³ Tim Kelly, Arne Christiansen, and Ole Kittleson, *Tied to the Tracks* (Denver, CO: Pioneer, 1985) 51.

the Railroad takes place on the train, where innocent victims are trapped on a train barreling towards an oncoming locomotive. What is most interesting about this particular railroad melodrama, however, is that it includes a Chinese railroad laborer, listed in the script as "Tommy Tao, an elderly Oriental." Tommy is clearly a railroad employee, wearing a standard issue trackman uniform. Unlike Chinese characters in nineteenth-century melodrama, Tommy does not speak in pidgin. He is, however, primarily in the script for comic effect. His speeches often combine "Confucius say" witticisms with truly dreadful puns: "Confucius say, 'Bankrupt railroad like lazy athlete – no train!'"¹⁴ Also interesting in this melodrama is that both Tommy and a Caucasian railroad laborer, Billy, are permitted to speak and/or sing about their frustrations with the railroad company:

BILLY. We don't ride in the engine.

TOMMY. We don't get lots of pay.

(*Gong*)

BILLY. There's no brass on our hats.

TOMMY. We don't have lots of say.

BOTH. But we roll out of bed

To our duties each day

To work for the T.M.& P.¹⁵

That a Chinese worker is permitted to voice his dissatisfaction with his employer suggests a significant change in the perception of workers' rights, and more specifically, of Chinese workers' rights. Popular attitudes have changed since 1882, of course, and audiences in 1987 would likely have thought nothing of two disgruntled employees – regardless of ethnicity – complaining a bit about their jobs.

Perhaps a little more controversial would have been Tommy's other primary comic function in the script: as a love interest for the elderly Countess Von Tostic. The Countess and

¹⁴ Dutton Foster, Ray Hannisian, and Lee Stametz, *Lurking on the Railroad; or, Will She Give Him a Wide Berth?* (Woodstock, IL: Dramatic, 1987) 7.

¹⁵ Foster 15.

Tommy have a unique relationship. When Tommy tries to offer one of his words of wisdom, she replies, "Listen, Grampa, don't lecture me! I'm from the big time!" Tommy, however, does not take any grief from the Countess, countering, "Perhaps you must pay attention to small time! Woman with nose in air unable to smell dog deposit on shoe!"¹⁶ This particular exchange does not vary greatly from similar comic exchanges between Chinese servants and Irish maids in nineteenth-century melodrama. However, the playwright does not stop with this banter. Rather, he allows the Countess and Tommy to fall in love. "I am being enlightened by an old, lower-middle-class, non-Caucasian immigrant! I feel so wonderful!" the Countess confesses. The happy couple is engaged by the end of the play. An inter-racial engagement would not have occurred in a nineteenth-century frontier melodrama. Furthermore, a white character of any standing would not have acknowledged having learned anything or been made a better person by a "non-Caucasian immigrant." The relationship between the Countess and Tommy reveals a shift in public attitudes about immigrants and about miscegenation. Yet, Tommy's role is as a comic side-kick; his English, though not technically pidgin, comes across as "other." He is a funny part of the play, indeed, but he is certainly not on the same par as the hero. The Countess, because of her age, is not on the same level as the heroine. Thus, *Lurking on the Railroad* allows the two outcasts to find one another, and to make jokes for the pleasure of the audience.

Ultimately, none of these railroad melodramas offers a critique or a re-scripting of history. Rather, the railroad is just one more way to burlesque the sensation melodrama of the nineteenth century. *Tied to the Tracks* and similar fare do not deconstruct nineteenth-century history or the way in which history is made. Instead, these melodramas operate as a parody of the genre. The sensation melodrama – like the railroad itself – has become somewhat irrelevant; it is good for an occasional trip down memory lane or a cheap laugh, but it is certainly not to be

¹⁶ Foster 31.

taken seriously. At least, not by audiences. Theatre companies and playwrights, on the other hand, have made a considerable profit on these melodramas, making them a very serious business.

Museums and Reenactments: “The Cupboard’s Down the Hall and Around the Corner”

Just as "old-fashioned" melodramas lure tourists to step back into history, museums and reenactments invite patrons to revisit the past, to learn about America's history, and to spend a few dollars in the gift shop. Located at the exact location of the famous "uniting" of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines, the Golden Spike National Historic Site in Promontory Summit, Utah, offers visitors a variety of educational and participatory activities. In addition to a few exhibits and artifacts, the museum offers videos, books, a live reenactment, and miles of graded tracks and land that visitors can drive and/or walk.

By all accounts, the reenactment of the golden spike ceremony is the most popular offering at the site, which is maintained by the National Park Service. Every Saturday in the summer months, and annually on May 10, a group of volunteers reenact the ceremony held in 1869, embodying the "heroes" of that day: Stanford, Dodge, and countless other dignitaries. Dozens of tourists gather every Saturday to watch the reenactment; the numbers increase significantly for the annual reenactment on May 10th. The Centennial reenactment in 1969 drew a crowd of 28,000.¹⁷ The famous photograph taken on May 10, 1869 is recreated each time the Golden Spike Ceremony is offered to the public. The photograph shown in Figure 5.1 was taken at a reenactment of the ceremony in August of 2004. Interestingly, the image is only slightly reminiscent of Russell's famous photograph. This picture is much "cleaner," with fewer people. Only the dignitaries make it in this frame; the countless laborers – Irish, Mormon, Chinese – are

¹⁷ Michael Johnson, ed., "The Last Spike Is Driven: A Reenactment Script for the Golden Spike Ceremony," Golden Spike National Historic Site, 2001.

left to the imagination. This empty space can likely be attributed to logistics; in a rural Utah town, it is quite a challenge to find the dozen or so volunteers to reenact a ceremony every Saturday. To find upwards of one hundred extras to fill in the space would be virtually impossible. On special occasions, such as the May 10th anniversary ceremonies held annually at the park, the cast of reenactors is multiplied, filling in empty spaces both in the photographic frame and in the audience. Yet even photographs of the large-scale reenactments contain no Chinese faces.



Figure 5.1: Visitors Watch a Reenactment of the Golden Spike Ceremony at the Golden Spike National Historic Site; August 7, 2004

Scholars are divided regarding the performative and historiographic value of reenactment. Some see reenactment and living history as an historiographic tool for learning more about the past by experiencing elements of the past in the vehicle of the human body. Others argue that reenactment ultimately teaches living historians about *themselves*, about the present. In a recent article, Vanessa Agnew offers a scholarly introduction to reenactment: "Reenactment often verges close to fantasy role-playing in its elastic appropriation of both the

real and the imagined past."¹⁸ The resulting hybrid – what Rosemarie Bank refers to as "the conflation of real and faux"¹⁹ – is often consumed unquestioningly by spectators. And, as John Krugler points out, "Living history museums [and reenactments] are the chief way many Americans learn their history and chiefly what they envision when they think of history."²⁰ So what "history" of the railroad is communicated to and carried forward in the imaginations of visitors to the Golden Spike site?

The reenactment offered by volunteers at the Golden Spike site follows a script compiled by Michael Johnson and others. The script, entitled "The Last Spike is Driven," includes many of the speeches and telegraphic messages delivered on May 10, 1869, as recorded in local and national newspapers. The cast includes all of the "key players" who were present at the official ceremony in 1869: Edgar Mills (Master of Ceremonies); Dr. H.W. Harkness (newspaper editor); Reverend Todd; Leland Stanford (President of the Central Pacific); Dr. Thomas Durant (Vice-President of the Union Pacific); General Grenville Dodge (Union Pacific Chief Engineer); Mr. Tritle (U.S. Railroad Commissioner); Governor Safford (Governor of the Arizona Territory); and Mr. L.W. Coe (President of the Pacific Union Express Company). In addition to these roles, the script calls for a "Narrator" who is based on the telegraph operator who transmitted the ceremony to the rest of the country (see Fig. 5.2).

¹⁸ Vanessa Agnew, "Introduction: What Is Reenactment?" *Criticism* 46.3 (2004): 327-339.

¹⁹ Rosemarie K. Bank, "Representing History: Performing the Columbian Exposition." *Theatre Journal* 54.4 (2002): 589-606.

²⁰ John D. Krugler, "Behind the Public Presentations: Research and Scholarship at Living History Museums of Early America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd Ser. 48.3 (1991): 347-386.



Figure 5.2: The Narrator (Telegraph Operator) Signals the Arrival of the Union Pacific Locomotive

Approximately 75 spectators witnessed the reenactment on August 7, 2004. Seated on benches made from railroad ties, and baking in the hot Utah sun, these tourists waited with their cameras ready for the entrance of the cast and, most importantly, the replica locomotives that



Figure 5.3: "Stanford" Addresses the Crowd

screamed down the tracks from the east and the west. Before the official (scripted) ceremony began, Richard Felt, the volunteer portraying Leland Stanford, addressed the crowd (see Fig. 5.3): "Does anybody know what day it is?" After a few chuckles and sideways glances between audience members, the gentlemen concluded, "You're confused aren't you? You all went through a time-warped when you entered the park. Today is May 10, 1869." The man dressed as Leland

Stanford effectively welcomed the 2004 audience into the "conflation of real and faux." He encouraged the spectators to play the roles of the hundreds of spectators on that day in 1869: "You're disgruntled. Most of you have been here since May 8 – so let's hear you." The crowd obediently made noise.

A woman with very short hair (i.e., "passable" as a man) was costumed as the telegraph operator. She sat at a table to the side of the "scene" and narrated the ceremony from her post. In addition to a telegraph machine, this volunteer had two signs, which she held up at various moments in the ceremony. One sign read, "Cheer," and the other read, "Boo" (see Fig. 5.4). This nod to the old-fashioned western melodrama only heightened the feeling that we were all participating in a performance. The narrator/telegraph operator voices the only reference to Chinese laborers in the entire event: "They have come," she says, "the wealthy and the poor, the laborer and his boss, the Chinese and the Irish, people of many races and many creeds."



Figure 5.4: The Narrator Requests a "Cheer"

The remainder of the reenactment relies upon tried and true rhetoric. The Master of Ceremonies describes a "union which this day shall be consummated forever."²¹ The narrator concludes the ceremony with a reminder to the spectators:

At that moment one era ended and another began. America's westward movement would no longer be limited to the plodding pace of a covered wagon; it would forge ahead with the speed of a locomotive. . . . By the early 1890s, the frontier process in the United States had come to a close, hastened by four transcontinental railroads eventually built across the west. Yet it all began here,

²¹ Johnson 2.

Promontory Summit, Utah, where a golden spike became a symbol of American strength and the promise of a better tomorrow.²²

Armed with the majestic symbolism of the railroad, and reminded of the glorious promise of "American strength," visitors were invited to return inside the museum to watch a video before driving 50 miles back to civilization.

The video, aptly titled "The Golden Spike," is produced by the National Park Service and continues the traditional rhetoric of the railroad as a symbol of unity and promise. The documentary-style film contains still images, such as Russell's famous Promontory Summit photograph, as well as costumed actors reenacting historical events. Beginning with the divisiveness of the Civil War, the film immediately introduces the ability of the railroad to unite the country, to "marry the nation" and create a "Republic that is continental."²³

The film, unlike the reenacted ceremony outside, does provide information about the significance of Chinese labor; it does so, however, in a back-handed, decidedly tactless tone, referring to the "diminutive" Chinese laborers as "an army of coolies." Significantly, the term "coolie" was commonly (and incorrectly) used in nineteenth-century America; "coolies" were enslaved Chinese men who were sold in a slave trade covering much of Central and South America.²⁴ The Chinese laborers in the United States – though certainly underpaid and under appreciated – were not slaves. They were not "coolies." The film's use of this inaccurate (and generally considered derogatory) terminology betrays its grounding in an ideology not much different than that which prevailed in nineteenth-century America.

In addition to using outdated racial terminology, the film further distances itself from the reality of Chinese labor by the way in which these laborers are physically portrayed. Irish and

²² Johnson 12.

²³ "The Golden Spike," Video produced by the National Park Service, Department of the Interior.

²⁴ Iris Chang, *The Chinese In America* (New York: Penguin, 2003) 30.

other Caucasian laborers are portrayed actively working on the rails; their faces are visible, and they occasionally pause to wipe sweat from their brows. Chinese laborers, by contrast, are shown only as shadows; the viewer sees the silhouette of two small-framed men with baggy pants and pointy hats, their shadows swinging pickaxes against a tunnel wall. While the Chinese laborers are mentioned, they are not truly present.

This "shadow-presence" of the Chinese is continued in the remaining component of the Golden Spike National Historic Site: the exhibits. I began my study with a quote in which Peter Burke argues for historians to be "Remembrancers," those who are "the guardians of the skeletons in the cupboard of the social memory." At the Golden Spike site, museum curators have included the cupboard in their display; there are several cases of artifacts from Chinese laborers, along with charts depicting the importance of Chinese labor in railroad construction. Yet this "cupboard" is not readily visible; in fact, a visitor to the museum may easily miss the cupboard altogether as it is hidden down the hall and around the corner from the main entrance to the facility. The Golden Spike National Historic Site, then, offers a "conflation of real and faux," scripting a version of history that Herodotus would admire; it tells of the greatness of American engineering, the beauty of American soil, and the promise of America's future.

The California State Railroad Museum in Sacramento, California, by contrast, has made a concerted effort to incorporate Chinese laborers into the story of California's railroad history. The museum's inclusion of Chinese and other minority railroad laborers is readily apparent in the first activity experienced by all museum goers: the Orientation Film. Visitors are ushered into a screening room, where a film is broadcast on a large screen; the environment is reminiscent of many suburban movie-theatres. Visitors view a film entitled, "Evidence of a Dream," which is an updated version of an earlier film entitled "Orientation Program." Significant changes were

made with the new film, which was introduced in 1991. Most specifically, "Evidence of a Dream" emphasizes the contributions of Chinese, Black, and Latino laborers, groups that were ignored in the previous film used from 1981 to 1991.

The original "Orientation Program" consisted of several vignettes, all presented with a nostalgic lens. In her recent critical analysis of the film, Teresa Bergman explains the effects of portraying railroad history through nostalgia:

A nostalgic interpretation of railroad history works to flatten and simplify the extremely complex social and cultural impacts associated with the railroad and technology in general. A nostalgic viewpoint whitewashes any discrepancies associated with economic class, race, and gender in favor of celebrating progress in the form of railroad technology.²⁵

In the 1981 film, this "whitewashing" is manifest in a complete absence of any mention of Chinese laborers.

Perhaps driven by a larger movement towards multiculturalism, the California State Railroad Museum decided to rectify the distorted view of history presented in the earlier "Orientation Program." The new film, "Evidence of a Dream," indeed includes several sequences with minorities: Native Americans displaced by the railroad; Chinese laborers on the Central Pacific crew; Mexican railroad employees; the first female engineer; and Blacks in the southern United States who benefit from the trade made possible by the railroad. The film's narrator comments on the role of the railroad in the lives of these minorities: "[T]echnology would replace inequity by serving people of every origin."²⁶ Thus, while the film includes ethnic minorities in its history of the railroad, it does so by insisting that the railroad offered opportunity for ethnic groups. Any discussion of the exploitation of minority labor by railroad companies is absent.

²⁵ Teresa Bergman, "A Critical Analysis of the California State Railroad Museum's Orientation Films." *Western Journal of Communication* 67:4 (2003): 432.

²⁶ qtd. in Bergman 443.

Bergman concludes that both the 1981 film and the 1991 film rely on a nostalgic lens in their telling of railroad history, resulting in a "simplification" and a "romanticizing" of the impact of railroads on society. She maintains that the 1991 film does not significantly change in tone; rather, it merely adds several minority groups into an existing historical narrative. The resulting "laundry list" feels empty and simplistic: "The addition of minority representation to the [California State Railroad Museum's] orientation film certainly gives voice to a previously missing component of California railroad history, but when filtered through a nostalgic lens its ideological message is uncritically celebratory."²⁷ Thus, while visitors are quickly reminded of the contributions of ethnic groups in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, this "reminder" fails to serve as a "Remembrancer" – the "things we would like to forget" remain unspoken. Museumgoers exit the theatre room into the museum's exhibits armed with the knowledge that Chinese laborers were tough, resourceful, and vitally important in railroad construction. Yet they likely also walk into the main portion of the museum unaware that these "invaluable" laborers were officially excluded from the United States for nearly sixty years, or that in California, Chinese individuals were not allowed to be attorneys, certified public accountants, or registered nurses – exclusions that remained on the books until after WWII.²⁸ By "celebrating" Chinese accomplishment without acknowledging Chinese sacrifice, the museum offers a picture of railroad history that is as distorted as Russell's photograph at Promontory Summit.

Once they exit the theatre, visitors to the California State Railroad Museum are immediately assigned a tour guide, who provides narration as the group meanders through the museum's extensive exhibits. The theatricality of the museum experience continues as members

²⁷ Bergman 439.

²⁸ Dave Williams, *Misreading the Chinese Character: Images of the Chinese in Euroamerican Drama to 1925* (New York: Lang, 2000) 94.

of the tour group are occasionally "recruited" by the tour guide to portray specific historical characters. Having assigned the roles of "Leland Stanford" and "General Dodge," for example, the guide provides his actors with their lines, and the museum goers participate in a mini-reenactment of a piece of railroad history. It is in this portion of the museum that visitors are provided with hints as to the treatment of Chinese laborers; "They weren't in the photograph," says tour guide Jack Davis, "because they were resented." A placard beside a photograph of Chinese laborers indicates that they suffered "racial hostilities." Yet there is no mention at all of the Exclusion Act of 1882. The California State Railroad Museum has chosen a vocabulary that fails to hold America accountable for its past and its present. By referring to the anti-Chinese movement as a series of "racial hostilities" fueled by "resentment," the museum allows modern-day Americans to understand the racial tensions of the past as a series of isolated incidents within ignorant communities, and certainly not as representative of nineteenth-century America as a whole. By contrast, if visitors were told about state and federal governments' complicity in the anti-Chinese movement, they might be forced to step outside a nostalgic reverie long enough to consider the possibility that the railroad symbolized different things for different people, and that for some of those people, the railroad symbolized government-endorsed exclusion from "America."

The "skeletons in the cupboard of social memory" remain hidden at the Golden Spike National Historic Site because the "cupboard" is tucked away down the hall and around the corner. At the California State Railroad Museum, the "cupboard" is in plain sight, but the "skeletons" are not; rather, the cupboard has been freshly stained to accentuate the grain of its rich wood, and on the cupboard door is a beautiful image of heroic ethnic laborers and the progress ushered in with American railroads. These two museums negotiate nostalgia and guilt

about past injustices in their attempts to sell tickets and remain relevant. Yet the "railroad history" performed at these museums – whether filtered by nostalgia or multiculturalism – fails to tell a multi-layered history. These museums do not tell the story of railroad construction in a way that recognizes that there are multiple perspectives, that no one laborer was the same as the next. In doing so, these two museums perpetuate a simplistic version of railroad history, laden with old stereotypes ("an army of coolies") and new stereotypes (talented Chinese laborers who accomplished much and suffered not at all in a beautiful era of American progress and technological equality). Reliance on these simplistic generalizations allows today's audience to enjoy a stroll down the nation's history without confronting the complexities of that history. Perhaps more importantly, a simplified historical narrative influences the way contemporary audiences view the history we are making today. Such historical narratives give us permission to categorize today's events with similar straightforward generalizations and to ignore the complex factors that continue to shape our understanding of unity and of what it means to be "American."

Chinese-American Playwrights: Exposing Skeletons by Staging Stereotypes

In his book, *Performing History*, Freddie Rokem writes that "the theatre, by performing history, is thus redoing something which has already been done in the past, creating a secondary elaboration of this historical event."²⁹ Plays about nineteenth-century railroad construction written in the twentieth and twenty-first century, then, have the opportunity to comment not just on the historical event but also on the transmission and canonization of the history. Plays written about the late nineteenth-century frontier by Chinese-American playwrights, unlike the "old fashioned melodramas" presented by many amateur companies, are more likely to be produced by professional theatre companies. Perhaps not coincidentally, these plays are also much more likely to critique the history they present. David Henry Hwang's *The Dance and the Railroad*

²⁹ Rokem 6.

was commissioned by the New Federal Theatre and opened on March 25, 1981. It was later produced by Joseph Papp at the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre, where it met immediate critical success, earning a 1982 Drama Desk Nomination. Since then, the play has been periodically revived at such regional theatres as the Asian American Theatre Company in San Francisco and East West Players.³⁰

The Dance and the Railroad tells the story of two Chinese railroad laborers in 1867: Lone, a twenty-year-old man who has been in America for two years; and Ma, an eighteen-year old who's tenure in the United States is only four weeks. More specifically, the play takes place on a mountaintop *near* the transcontinental railroad. This is significant because while the railroad is an ever-present third character, it is not visible to the audience. Thus, the two men are not identified by their connection to the railroad; they have an identity outside of what they do. As the play starts, Lone has retreated to the mountaintop to practice Chinese Opera, a nightly ritual for him. Ma has come to find Lone, to report the status of the Chinese laborers' strike against the railroad company. Ma's naiveté is immediately apparent through his romanticized description of the life of a Chinese railroad laborer. He tries to combat Lone's cynicism:

LONE. So, you know all about "America?" Tell me, what kind of stories will you tell?

MA. I'll say, "We laid tracks like soldiers. Mountains? We hung from cliffs in baskets and the winds blew us like birds. Snow? We lived underground like moles for days at a time. Deserts? We —"³¹

Lone immediately interrupts Ma's grandiose account of what a Chinese laborer does on a daily basis, telling him that he doesn't know anything about life along the railroad, but that he'll learn soon enough that life is hard in America.

³⁰ David Henry Hwang, *The Dance and the Railroad and Family Devotions* (New York: Dramatists, 1983).

³¹ Hwang 17-18.

As the play progresses, we begin to see the interaction of Lone's cynicism and Ma's naiveté. Ma thinks he wants to take Opera lessons from Lone, but Lone, who is cynical about life in America, has an idealistic notion of the Chinese Opera, and in his mind the Opera should not be denigrated by individuals like Ma who are really only tinkering in it for fun. In Lone's attempts to convince Ma that the Opera is not for him, we begin to understand why the Opera is so important to him, why he must remain idealistic about his art:

To practice every day, you must have a fear to force you up here. . . . When my body hurts too much to come here, I look at the other ChinaMen and think, "They are dead. Their muscles work only because the white man forces them. I live because I can still force my muscles to work for me." They are dead.³²

For Lone, practicing Opera after ten hours of grueling labor on the railroad is the only thing that keeps him Chinese, that keeps him human. It is the way he can take out his frustrations with life in America.

When Lone finally agrees to teach Ma how to be an actor in the Chinese Opera, the audience gets the sense that he is being particularly brutal in his lessons. He forces Ma to stand like a duck and leaves him to be a "locust" all night long. The next morning, though, Lone returns to Ma, excited with the news that the strike has ended. The Chinese have won some of their demands. In their celebration, the two men create a Chinese Opera that reenacts their journey from China to America and the strike they've just been a part of. Significantly, the two men turn the tables on nineteenth-century stereotypes of Chinese immigrants, using the visual and aural markers of voice, hair, and eyes to caricature Caucasian bosses. Lone plays the part of a white railroad official:

³² Hwang 22.

LONE. I am a white devil! Listen to my stupid language: "Wha chee doo doo blah blah." Look at my wide eyes – like I have drunk seventy-two pots of tea. Look at my funny hair – twisting, turning, like a snake telling lies.

MA. Stupid demons. As confused as your hair. We will strike!³³

The men reenact the victory in the strike, and they celebrate. The celebration segues to a scene in which Lone and Ma enact the next work day, and Ma is wounded when he suddenly quits the Opera scene.

MA. Why didn't we just end it with the celebration?

LONE. But Ma, the celebration's not the end. We're returning to work. Today. At dawn.³⁴

Ma is disillusioned when he hears Lone tell the details of the strike resolution. The Chinese had demanded fourteen dollars a day and that their 10-hour work day be reduced to an 8-hour day. They were successful only in obtaining an 8-hour day and eight dollars a day. Ma is furious, but Lone feels Ma is underestimating the accomplishment of the strikers. Lone is proud of the Chinese workers, and is glad that they were able to achieve any change at all. Ma seems finally to be aware of his naiveté:

MA. I've got to change myself. Toughen up. Take no shit. Count my change. Learn to gamble. Learn to win. Learn to stare. Learn to deny. Learn to look at men with opaque eyes.³⁵

For Ma, the strike – even in its victory for the Chinese laborers – results in a hardening of the soul. It is as though his experience with the strike and with the Chinese Opera practices have revealed to him that he doesn't belong in either world: he is not meant to be an actor in the Chinese Opera, and he is not happy as a laborer in America. He is lost. He has become afflicted with Lone's cynicism.

³³ Hwang 37.

³⁴ Hwang 39.

³⁵ Hwang 41.

Lone, on the other hand, seems to have found a bit of the dreamer in himself once more. He is proud of his fellow Chinese laborers, and he finds that, at this moment, his desire to practice Chinese Opera is not motivated by fear:

LONE. I'm going to practice some before work. There's still time.

MA. Practice? But you said you lost your fear. And you said that's what brings you up here.

LONE. I guess I was wrong about that, too. Today I am dancing for no reason at all.³⁶

In the end, the two men have switched roles. The cynic has allowed the dreamer in him to come to the surface, and the naïve young man has resigned himself to an empty life of grueling labor and dissatisfaction with his place in the world.

Like Hwang's *Dance and the Railroad*, Laurence Yep's *Pay the Chinaman* offers a glimpse into the experience of Chinese immigrants in the last half of the nineteenth century. Yep's play, also like Hwang's, utilizes two characters, both Chinese and both presumably performed by Asian actors. *Pay the Chinaman* was originally developed as part of "California On Stage," a project aimed at staging California's history. It premiered at the Asian American Theatre in San Francisco in 1987. Set in California in 1893, the play's two characters engage in a game of deception as each man tries to con the other. As the Con Man and the Young Man continue to play and bet on a version of solitaire known as "Pay the Chinaman," the audience remains unsure which of the two men is really in control of the situation.

The older Con Man, who is preparing to leave for China, offers advice to the Young Man about how to survive in America even as he is trying to swindle every penny the Young Man has to his name. The young man's response reflects the strict rules of the Exclusion Act of 1882, which prohibited the immigration of non-merchant class Chinese:

³⁶ Hwang 42.

CON MAN. It's time to go. Hate's boiling on the stove. . . . Welcome to America – the land of the Golden Mountain. Demons don't let in many of your kind nowadays.

YOUNG MAN. Came in as a merchant's boy. Paper son. New name. New village. Whole new person.³⁷

The Young Man has, in effect, had to assume the identity of a con man in order to enter the country at all. He has lost the privilege of being himself. Immigration laws have required him to pretend to be somebody else. As the Con Man continues his analysis of life in America, the Young Man concludes, "You and me, all us Chinese got to stick together." But, as far as the Con Man is concerned, Chinese can't trust anybody, not even other Chinese, because everybody is conning everybody else. The Con Man "takes out a thick wad of bills. He pretends to be an agent as he counts out the money."

CON MAN. Oh, no, I wouldn't steer you wrong. You'll get rich if you go. Why do you think they call it the land of the Golden Mountain? Nuggets big as your fists right there in the dirt. Just scoop 'em up. Hell, here's a tip just 'cause I like you. You find yourself a nice hill and lay down and the nuggets roll right into your palms.

YOUNG MAN. Who said that?

CON MAN. Last man I trusted.³⁸

The Con Man's distrust of people is not limited to other Chinese. He also, obviously, distrusts white people, whom he calls "white demons." The Young Man challenges the Con Man about his use of the term "white demons." "Names are power," says the Young Man. "Call them demons and they are demons." The Con Man applies a quick dose of reality to the Young Man's ideas:

CON MAN. This is the third Chinatown. First one used to be over there in the demon town. But a mob of demons burnt it down. So the Chinese built a new one on this side of the river. And the mob torched that one down. So the Chinese put up a third.³⁹

³⁷ Laurence Yep, "Pay the Chinaman," *Between Worlds: Contemporary Asian-American Plays*, ed Misha Berson (New York: TCG, 1990) 183.

³⁸ Yep, "Chinaman" 186.

³⁹ Yep, "Chinaman" 188.

As the conversation and the betting continue, the audience is not sure whom to trust. The Young Man seems headed for trouble if he does not listen to the Con Man's advice about life in America. And yet, as the play ends, the Con Man has been conned by the Young Man. The Con Man has lost all of his money; he has nothing to take back to China from the "Golden Mountain." Instead, the Young Man has taken the Con Man's place, presumably situating himself to con the next generation of Chinese immigrants.

Deception in *Pay the Chinaman* is unavoidable. Dissimulation as survival. The message of the play is simultaneously heartbreaking and hopeful. The Con Man (the older generation) has been stripped of his hard earned money. While discriminatory practices by white Americans no doubt contributed to the Con Man's inability to keep his money, the play suggests that the younger Chinese generation is at least partially responsible for the old man's financial ruin. Ultimately, the Young Man has learned he must look out for himself in "America," the land of danger for Chinese immigrants. He has taken the older man's money and wisdom and must now try to survive long enough to pass his money and wisdom on to a newer generation, a generation that may not have to deceive in order to survive. The tragedy of the Young Man's inability to be himself is tempered by the knowledge that he knows how to survive, that he will survive, and that he will teach new generations how to survive.

Yet the circular action of *Pay the Chinaman* means more than mere survival of an ethnic group; it also ensures the perpetuation of a stereotype. *Pay the Chinaman* specifically plays on the nineteenth-century generalization that Chinese immigrants were deceitful. The Con Man passes his skills of deceit on to the next generation. James S. Moy, author of a critical study of the image of Chinese in American theatre and film, takes issue with what he perceives as a mere alteration of previous stereotypes. In Yep's play, for example, the Con Man and the Young Man

may be given more agency than was given to Chinese characters in nineteenth-century plays; yet the play also relies on dominant nineteenth-century stereotypes in its development of character and plot. In Hwang's play, Ma and Lone are given the right to tell their own stories; they are even given the chance to comment on western stereotypes of Chinese immigrants. Yet the nineteenth-century stereotype of Chinese immigrants is not ultimately corrected in Hwang's play either. Beneath the dialogue and the plot, Ma and Lone are still seen as “Other” than some off-stage “American” default. More significantly, this embodiment of the “Other” is ultimately designed for consumption. According to Moy, Hwang and others have attempted to produce plays that draw attention to and correct the Asian stereotype, yet

an awkward tension exist[s] between the Anglo-American audiences' desire to see authenticated stereotypes on the stage and the writers' desire to create "real" representations that are commercially viable. While their attacks on the dominant culture's stereotypes were well intentioned, to be successful they finally had to offer what amounted to little more than refigured but "authentic" reinscriptions. In yielding to consumer desires, their attacks not only proved impotent, but their plays contributed to the creation of a new order of authenticated stereotype.⁴⁰

In the nineteenth century, audiences flocked to the theatre to see what an “authentic” Chinese immigrant looked and acted like. Audiences of *Dance and the Railroad* and *Pay the Chinaman* are offered visual representations of “Chinese immigrant” that are “authentic” in that they are crafted by Asian-American playwrights and performers; yet they are also “authentic” in the nineteenth-century sense of the word, in that they are born from the nineteenth-century stereotype. They look and (in the case of *Pay the Chinaman*) act like old stereotypes. The marketable “authenticity” of the nineteenth-century Stage Chinaman merges with the political “authenticity” of Asian-American self-representation found in Hwang’s and Yep’s plays to create a re-packaged version of the Stage Chinaman.

⁴⁰ James S. Moy, *Marginal Sights: Staging the Chinese in America* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1993) 21-22.

The Dance and the Railroad and *Pay the Chinaman* both feature two Chinese characters and present the challenges faced by Chinese immigrants in nineteenth-century America. Yet it can be argued that these Chinese characters are, at bottom, the old stereotypes packaged in a new box; or rather, that they are the same box with a slightly different present inside. The external stereotype of the Stage Chinaman remains; the Chinese men, after all, perform stage business involving their queues. And Yep's characters are as deceptive as Ah Sin ever was. Yet by the simple fact that these plays are told from the perspective of the Chinese immigrants, *Dance and the Railroad* and *Pay the Chinaman* are groundbreaking plays. Perhaps they do not ultimately eradicate lingering stereotypes; but they do reclaim for the Chinese laborer a history that had never before been staged from his perspective.

What these plays fail to do, however, is to simultaneously present multiple narratives. Nineteenth-century America was not as homogenized as nineteenth-century plays might lead one to believe; *Dance and the Railroad* and *Pay the Chinaman* are successful in bringing attention to a previously erased population. But these two plays stop short of envisioning a new kind of unity. In excluding non-Chinese voices, these plays fail to present a nuanced look at the interconnectedness, interdependence, and shared histories of many populations in American history. It is this interconnectedness, and not an equality of experience, that seems to me to hold exciting possibilities for performance and for the development of a more inclusive unity.

A "Little House," A "Medicine Woman," and A "Tale of Two Wheels"

Since the early days of silent film, the railroad has been a popular visual image in movies and on television. Scott Marble's 1896 play, *The Great Train Robbery* was adapted for film in 1903 and was an enormous success. Many early film reels contain footage of steam engines barreling down the tracks; soon train robberies and collisions became the hot storylines in the

movies. The railroad has appeared in more films and television shows than could possibly be examined in one study. Rather than attempt an exhaustive study of the railroad in twentieth and twenty-first century film and television, I have opted to examine three specific examples from popular film and television: *Little House on the Prairie* (1970s-1980s television series); *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1990s television series); and *Into the West* (a 2005 miniseries). I have chosen these three programs for several reasons. First, they are popular. The jury is still out on the recently released *Into the West*, but the popularity of *Little House* and *Dr. Quinn* is undeniable. The audience for these series is ever-increasing, due in great part to syndicated reruns. The Hallmark Channel airs four episodes of *Little House* every single day; *Dr. Quinn* also airs on that network. The popularity of these programs translates to a large audience of individuals who are exposed to a time period about which they may otherwise know very little. Second, these three programs make sense in this study because they come from three distinct eras (the 70s, the 90s, and 2005). Approaches to history have changed significantly since *Little House* debuted in 1975; inclusion of television programs from three different decades offers an opportunity to explore the effects of a changing historiography on popular entertainment. Third, these three television programs were and are marketed as programs for and about the family. Whether the family is headed by Charles Ingalls, Michaela Quinn, or Robert Wheeler, these three television series find the family (and the extended "community") as the driving force of storytelling. Family and community roles are emphasized, resulting in a sense of belonging. Such "belonging" lends itself well to a discussion of the understanding and establishment of unity.

Few could watch an episode of *Little House on the Prairie* without feeling a sense of nostalgia; from the warm lighting to the wholesome scripts, the television show offers textual,

visual, and aural signs of a simpler time in America. The story, of course, follows the childhood experiences of Laura Ingalls Wilder, her sisters, Mary and Carrie, and her parents, Charles and Caroline, as they labor to survive and thrive in the nineteenth-century American frontier. The television series is based on a series of autobiographical books by the real Laura Ingalls Wilder, published in the mid-1930s. While the television series tells a decidedly homogenous version of the American prairie, there are one or two episodes that deal with minority characters, particularly Jewish and Swedish immigrants. For the most part, though, episodes of *Little House on the Prairie* prove Charles and his frontier brethren to be wise, worthy, decent, hard-working men who had every right to move civilization into savage lands. The frontier in *Little House* symbolizes freedom, progress, and a good way of life.

The railroad figures prominently in two episodes of *Little House*. The first, entitled "The Runaway Caboose," originally aired 11 February 1976, and offered a thrilling hour of television reminiscent of the sensational railroad scenes in plays like *The Main Line*.⁴¹ Laura, Mary, and a friend become trapped in a caboose that has separated from the main train. It is barreling down the mountains, and an express train is headed straight for them. The frightened children try to pull the manual brakes, but the caboose does not stop. Charles and his friend, Mr. Edwards, spy the children racing down the tracks and they begin a frantic attempt to stop the impending accident. Charles, desperate to save his daughters, races his horse toward Sleepy Eye to stop the express train from leaving the station. Two horses later, Charles accomplishes his task, and he and Mr. Edwards are reunited with the children. The railroad represents a number of things in this episode: first, it is an icon of progress, as it facilitates transportation between frontier communities; second, it is a symbol of power, as the train's unleashed energy is nearly too much to contain; finally, it is a harbinger of the potential danger inherent in both progress and power.

⁴¹ "The Runaway Caboose," *Little House on the Prairie*, NBC. 11 Feb. 1977.

Ultimately, though, the train is no match for good, decent men like Charles Ingalls, so long as they are on a fresh horse.

Railroad construction is the subject of a February 1977 two-part episode entitled "To Live With Fear (Parts 1 and 2)."⁴² In this episode, Mary is seriously injured in an accident, and Charles is forced to find a higher paying job in order to cover her medical expenses. He and his best friend, Isaiah Edwards, head off to find jobs working with explosives on a tunneling project for the railroad. The first image of the tunneling site is one in which a white crew boss is yelling at a Chinese man. Several Chinese laborers are visible in the background; a few of the workers have queues, but the lead laborer (played by James Shigeta) has no queue. None of the men wear the round hats that were customary for Chinese laborers of the time. In this first sequence, the Chinese laborer, Wing, refuses to use the amount of dynamite that the white boss is pushing him to use. "I will not kill my crew because you will not listen to reason," he says in perfect English with no hint of an accent. Charles, who has observed this exchange, capitalizes on the opportunity to get Wing's job. After all, if Wing won't do what he's asked to do, somebody else will be ready and willing to comply with the boss's orders. Charles is hired on to lead the tunneling crew despite his complete inexperience with explosives. Wing tries to warn Charles not to use too much dynamite at once, but Charles has little time to listen to a "Chinaboy." He furiously works to complete the tunneling project, driven by the promise of hazard pay and a reward if the job is completed on time. When Wing shows Charles a dying Chinese man who was injured by using too much dynamite, Charles responds by saying that he has a daughter in a hospital bed. "What I'm telling you is that we take care of our own. That's the way it is."

While the audience likely sympathizes with Charles' determination to make money to pay for his daughters' life-saving operation, the episode clearly presents Charles' actions as "wrong"

⁴² "To Live With Fear, Parts One and Two." *Little House on the Prairie*. NBC. 14 Feb. 1977 and 21 Feb. 1977.

or at least "misguided." This is one of the few episodes in which Charles Ingalls is not the model of a moral man. His friend, Isaiah, voices the conscience that seems to have left Charles: when Charles refuses to stop work to attend a burial service for the Chinese laborer, Isaiah can't believe how his friend has changed. He vows to leave Charles and return home as soon as the funeral is over. Charles immediately enters the tunnel and begins to light the dynamite. The explosion disrupts the funeral service. It is immediately apparent that the explosion has caused a cave-in and that Charles and the white boss (Mr. Harris) are trapped inside. Isaiah pleads with the Chinese laborers to help dig them out. It is initially unclear whether the Chinese men will help, but Wing and his crew of laborers work tirelessly to free Charles. The very men whom Charles had disrespected stepped up to save his life. Charles is shown to have been wrong. He was wrong to have taken a job he was not qualified to complete, and he was wrong to have put his own need for money ahead of his responsibility to treat others with decency. We see Charles come to terms with his mistakes when he embraces Isaiah, who manages to reach Charles just in the nick of time. All the men stand together when the railroad company representative rides up and demands to know why the tunnel isn't done. They threaten to quit unless they are permitted to do the job safely.

Yet despite Charles' reconciliation with Isaiah and his participation in a stand against the boss, we do not see a moment in which Charles is made to confront his previous attitude toward the "Chinaboys." He has made peace with himself and has been returned to the model of a moral man without ever apologizing to Wing or the other Chinese laborers. Instead, the episode ends with a frequent occurrence on *Little House*: a weepy Charles Ingalls. Charles stands with tears in his eyes and a quivering lip as he sees his wife and his healthy daughter at the hospital. It all comes down to family, you see. And even though Charles behaved badly, he was acting to save

his family. "We take care of our own," he said. And despite his eventual support of Wing, the audience is fairly certain that for Charles, his "own" does not include Wing, Mr. Harris, or any of the other railroad workers. Rather, for Charles, family is what matters. And a man is right to do what it takes to ensure the safety of the people he loves.

Little House on the Prairie presents a nostalgic, heroic view of frontier history, of which the railroad is a part. Nearly two decades later, *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* reflects an emphasis on multiculturalism in the 1990s, presenting a historical narrative that replaces the reality of minority experiences in the nineteenth century with happy tales of inclusion and tolerance. *Dr. Quinn* tells the story of a female doctor in Colorado Springs, Colorado in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Dr. Michaela Quinn (Dr. Mike, for short) does not find immediate acceptance in the frontier community; many of the town's citizens are hesitant to be treated by a woman doctor. As the series progresses, however, Mike proves her skills as a doctor and as a healer; in fact, she is shown to heal the citizens' spiritual and social plagues as well as their medical ones. With frequent use of Native American, African-American, and Swedish characters, *Dr. Quinn* presents an image of frontier life in which people get along, for the most part. Sure, there are a few racial tensions every now and again, but Dr. Mike always prevails in ensuring tolerance and progressive thought in Colorado Springs.

It is not surprising, then, that the version of railroad history presented in *Dr. Quinn* is a tribute to tolerance and multiculturalism. Railroad construction is introduced in the first episode of the third season, entitled, "The Train." In this episode, we meet Peter, a Chinese railroad laborer who is the adopted son of a railroad surveyor.⁴³ The citizens of Colorado Springs debate the pros and cons of having a railroad come through town. Ultimately, they vote to allow the railroad, and Dr. Mike drives the first spike at the railroad's opening day of construction.

⁴³ "The Train." *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. CBS. 24 Sep. 1994.

The following season, the Chinese laborer, Peter, returns with two of his friends, the Chang brothers. Together, the three Chinese laborers help the town's resident African-American repair a steam engine. In an episode entitled, "Hell on Wheels," the writers of *Dr. Quinn* offer their most detailed depiction of railroad construction. Peter, still working on the railroad, comes to Dr. Mike to ask her to come to the railroad camp since so many of the workers have fallen ill. She readily agrees, and is accompanied by two of her adopted children, Colleen and Brian, her husband, Sully, and several members of the town. When they get to the camp, they discover that the camp's bartender is none other than Mike's oldest son, Matthew, who had run away in grief and anger after his fiancée had died. As soon as Dr. Mike and her entourage arrive in camp, several town folk arrange a spike-driving contest between a Caucasian laborer (Wilbur), a Chinese laborer (Xiang Lu), and Matthew, who enters the race primarily to communicate to Dr. Mike that he will do whatever he wants to do, regardless of her wishes. The spectators quickly make bets, most putting their money on Wilbur. The town's shopkeeper, Loren, voices his confidence in Wilbur: "Chinaman's no match for that Wilbur. Look at his arms. He's huge." Sully, ever the voice of tolerance and common sense, replies, "The biggest ain't always the fastest, Loren."⁴⁴ The race between Wilbur and Xiang Lu is very close, with the Chinese man's speed finally trumping the white man's size.

In a later scene, the contest winner is seriously wounded in an accident involving explosives. Dr. Mike and Colleen do not hesitate to treat him and other injured Chinese laborers. Two of the men do not survive, and Peter announces that they will have to make lanterns for the dead. Brian asks Peter to explain. "We believe that the spirit must travel across the dark water before it can enter Heaven," Peter says. "So we light a lantern to help guide the spirit on its journey home."

⁴⁴ "Hell on Wheels" *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*. CBS. 9 Dec. 1995.

With the wounded men out of commission, the railroad company solicits volunteers to sign up for the blasting jobs. Matthew, still convinced that there is no reason to live, eagerly agrees to hang over the edge of a cliff in a basket, light a fuse attached to nitroglycerin, and trust that his basket will be pulled up before the explosion occurs. He and Peter work together in a single basket. There is a nearly fatal accident in which the rope malfunctions. Moved by the sight of his brother, Matthew decides he does have something to live for, and he and Peter manage to scramble to safety.

Later, Brian and Colleen help Peter make lanterns and again listen to Peter's lessons on the significance of the lanterns:

COLLEEN. Why do you put the lanterns in the water?

PETER. Buddhists believe that life is like a sea of suffering. You place the lanterns on the water to help the spirits reach the other side of the sea.

COLLEEN. You believe that?

PETER. In some ways, yes. . . . You must grieve for your loved once, but then you must let them go across.

As the episode comes to a close, Matthew decides to light a lantern for his dead fiancée, Ingrid. He says goodbye to her as he pushes the lantern into the river. He has found peace, peace that is at least partially due to his participation in a Buddhist rite.

Several aspects of the portrayal of railroad construction in *Dr. Quinn* warrant further discussion. First, the television show clearly portrays the inherent dangers associated with working on the railroad, particularly those faced by Chinese laborers who were almost exclusively used in jobs involving explosives. Second, while the accomplishments of the Chinese laborers are shown, the episodes do not reflect that some of the dangers facing Chinese laborers had nothing to do with nitroglycerin, but rather with hatred and misunderstanding on the part of "Americans." Third, the only scene in which Chinese laborers are somewhat mistreated by a supervisor is a scene in which the town's African-American is the bully. White America is

in no way connected to the mistreatment of Chinese laborers. Finally, in its treatment of the Chinese laborers' religion, and in the eagerness with which the white Americans embrace the Chinese and their religion, these episodes of *Dr. Quinn* portray a false version of history. While the show strives to incorporate positive images of ethnic minorities, it does so at the expense of historical accuracy. The resulting, sugar-coated portrayal of railroad construction seems as unbalanced as Russell's 1869 photograph. The whole story has not been told. Rather, the story that has been told is the story that the political mood of the day has mandated.

Yet, the makers of *Dr. Quinn* did not intend to create a television series that was so accurate in its historical detail that it could supplement text books in high school history classes. Instead the television series uses the nineteenth century primarily as a backdrop, framing with a nostalgic glow the dominant storylines of inclusiveness, diversity, and progressive thought. To hold the creators of the show accountable for historical inaccuracies in the series would be to eliminate their creative license. And yet, given that many Americans base their understanding of American history on visual images (i.e., films, television shows, and museum exhibits) more than on textual accounts (i.e., diaries, newspaper accounts, text books), it is important to consider how performances of history such as those presented in *Dr. Quinn* are re-scripting the past, creating for a new generation of audiences a distorted historical narrative, a narrative that continues to rely on generalizations and that continues to permit Americans to ignore the processes through which we have created our national identity.

Into the West, a 2005 miniseries produced by Steven Spielberg for TNT, offers a hybrid of the nostalgia of *Little House* and the saccharine quality of *Dr. Quinn*. The miniseries, which aired in the summer months, was an enormous success for TNT, easily drawing viewers away from reruns on broadcast television. In fact, an estimated 89 million people watched one or more

of the six episodes.⁴⁵ In six installments and twelve hours of film, *Into the West* tells the larger story of westward expansion through the specific stories of two families – one white, one Lakota – who find that their lives are intertwined. Much of the epic centers on the interactions between white settlers and Native Americans during the nineteenth century. The nostalgia of *Little House* is manifest in the warm lighting, the beautiful cinematography, and the luscious musical score. The desire to appease our guilt about past injustices – which fueled much of *Dr. Quinn* – is revealed in *Into the West*'s tendency to elevate and almost deify the Native American aspects of the story. While the emphasis on Native American experiences can certainly be viewed as justified, given the tendency of previous movies, plays, and historical accounts to demonize or dismiss the Native presence, the miniseries nonetheless lacks complexity in many of its episodes. A review in *USA Today* comments on the way in which the show's producers seem to be making a value-judgment on history: "[D]espite claims to the contrary, *West* isn't really a history at all. Instead, it's a ponderous effort to correct the often malicious myths of older films, with their brave pioneers and ignorant savages, by recasting a new myth out of modern guilt."⁴⁶ The reviewer goes on to quote the film's lead white character, Jacob Wheeler, who has married a Lakota woman and who finds value in the Lakota culture: "We have a wheel that takes you from here to there," Wheeler says, "but they have a wheel that takes you to the stars." The *USA Today* reviewer takes issue with Wheeler's observation, or more accurately, with the filmmaker's attempts to prove that the Lakota wheel is somehow more valuable than the wheel of the white settlers:

As it turns out, our wheel took us to the stars, too – and enables us to do things like make 12-hour television movies, which would be hard to produce with spiritual wheels alone. Yes, it was pernicious of old movies to imply that Native

⁴⁵ Jon Lafayette, "TNT Likes 'West's' Performance," *TV Currents*. 1 Aug 2005: 4.

⁴⁶ "Plodding 'West' Eventually Goes South," *USA Today* 10 Jun 2005: 9E.

American culture was worthy of extinction, but it's equally ridiculous to elevate it above all others.⁴⁷

Yet, despite allegations of one-sidedness and a decidedly pedantic tone, *Into the West* at times offers a version of history that achieves a precarious balance between homogenous nostalgia and the need to appease cultural guilt by inverting old binaries. Such is the case with the film's representation of the construction of the transcontinental railroad.

Echoing nineteenth-century accounts of the "competition" between Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroad crews, the film alternates images of the two companies in scenes involving the railroad. On occasion, the film offers a scene in which the viewer is faced with the Native American response to the coming railroad. In one such scene, a famous Lakota warrior, Red Cloud, addresses tribe members:

I did not ask for or want what happened to this land. I have a small piece of land left and I don't want the white man to make an Iron Road through it. As long as I live I'm going to keep this land.⁴⁸

Red Cloud's speech motivates several warriors to fight westward expansion of the railroad. As the film progresses, however, we see that the Native Americans cannot stop the Iron Horse. A mournful mis-en-scene finds a lone warrior on horseback staring at a wide expanse of track through isolated prairie.

For the most part, though, the story of railroad construction involves the Union Pacific and Central Pacific crews. We first see the Union Pacific near North Platte, Nebraska, as a member of the Wheeler clan sets up stores and saloons along the expanding line. As the Union Pacific story line progresses, we see the effects of capitalist enterprise on both the prairie and the laboring class. Jacob Wheeler narrates:

⁴⁷ "Plodding" 9E.

⁴⁸ "Hell on Wheels." *Into the West*. TNT. 8 July 2005.

Once North Platte had only been an empty prairie, 300 miles west of Omaha. Ambitious men like Daniel Wheeler had turned the wilderness into a boom town. Carnivorous swarms followed the railroad workers every step of the way, devouring their weekly pay faster than grasshoppers.⁴⁹

We see these “carnivorous” capitalists tearing down their establishments and transporting them by train to the next stop on the construction front. When a Union Pacific official questions Daniel Wheeler’s right to “own” businesses on UP property, Wheeler insinuates that he knows all about the UP’s creative measurement of grade to get the \$48,000 per mile of track laid on hills versus \$16,000 for each mile of track on flat land. His implication, of course, is that the UP is just as scandalous and crooked as he is, and that as long as they both have an “understanding,” there will be no problem. The Union Pacific turns a blind eye to Wheeler’s operations; the Daniel Wheeler family and the UP make an enormous amount of money off of railroad construction.

The storyline of the Central Pacific, by contrast, does not have to do with financial scandals but rather with ethnic labor. The film offers a fairly accurate representation of CP laborers, 90% of whom were Chinese. *Into the West* also effectively portrays the discrimination faced by Chinese laborers and their exploitation at the hands of white bosses. In the first scene involving the Central Pacific, the filmmakers introduce the racial tension prompted by Charles Crocker’s decision to hire Chinese labor. As several Chinese men swing at spikes, an Irish crew chief yells at any Chinese who will listen: “Celestials?! I need men. What do you know about railroad construction?” Abe Wheeler, the part-Lakota/part-Caucasian son of Jacob Wheeler and Thunder Heart Woman, who happens to be working on the railroad, responds to the Irish boss’s question with a phrase variously attributed to Crocker, Strobridge, and other dignitaries: “They built the Great Wall of China, didn’t they?” The Irish boss spits angrily on the ground and

⁴⁹ “Hell on Wheels,” *Into the West*.

proceeds to shout at the Chinese crew, appropriating the “language” associated with Chinese laborers: “Come on, movee movee, quickee quickee!” Abe quickly befriends a Chinese worker named Chow-Ping, who voices his perception of life in America. Several years before, he says, he had been a gold miner, but his claim had been taken from him by a white man: “‘Gold not for Chinese,’ he say. White Ghost. Demon. Tell us what to do. Call us coolies.”

This first scene with the CP, then, clearly establishes that Chinese railroad laborers were mistreated, that white men doubted their abilities to perform hard manual labor, and that the Chinese laborers knew how to hide their growing resentment from those who could harm them. As the scene progresses, we see that Chinese laborers were not just effective workers; they were *ingenious* workers. Strobridge, the head of construction for the CP, stands in front of a mountain, wondering how to build tracks over it. “Your plan to accomplish this, Mr. Strobridge?” asks a white crew chief. “Damned if I know,” replies the boss. It is here that we really begin to see the story of Chinese ingenuity in the construction of the American railroad. Chow-Ping chats with his newfound Indian/American friend, Abe: “Bossy man think road not possible. Use very bad language. But road possible.” Abe asks the obvious question: “How?” The answer comes in the very next shot: dozens of Chinese laborers hang off the side of the mountain in baskets, lighting fuses attached to nitroglycerin, and scrambling up the mountainside before the explosion occurs. Just as is the case in *Dr. Quinn, Into the West* finds Abe and Chow-Ping in a scary situation when their basket malfunctions. Once more, the Chinese man saves the life of his non-Chinese friend, further establishing his heroism. As the Chinese and Abe work to blast apart the mountain, the whites cheer and look on with pride at their own accomplishments. Later scenes show the Chinese crews tunneling through Donner Summit, and suffering from dehydration in the Nevada desert. The Irish crew chief, won over by the diligence of his crew,

stands up for the Chinese men, and demands a day of rest for his workers. When Abe reminds the Irish man that he'd once said he had no use for the Chinese, the chief replies, "I have even less for bosses." While it is unclear whether this "mini-strike" occurred as scripted, it is true that Chinese crews and their Irish bosses occasionally worked well together. Thus, as the Central Pacific crews inch toward Utah, the viewer is presented with a version of railroad history that somewhat accurately portrays the events of the Central Pacific's journey eastward.

Less "accurate" is the film's depiction of the famous ceremony at Promontory Summit, Utah. The first historical inaccuracy occurs with the subtitles announcing the date and location. "Promontory Point, Utah," they read, perpetuating the oft-made mistake. Other than this obvious historical error, though, the scene offers an interesting commentary on the ceremony uniting the two lines of track. For the most part, the film presents a relatively balanced view of the celebration, acknowledging both the justifiable excitement and pride in a monumental accomplishment and the unconscionable exclusion of Chinese laborers from the famous photograph marking the occasion.

The scene begins with the "set up" before the ceremony officially starts; Abe and Chow-Ping place the last tie in its position, and a team of laborers hauls in the final rails. In a voice-over, Jacob Wheeler explains the significance of the occasion:

For my wayward son, Abe, that May morning was a triumph like no other. A ribbon of iron stretched for 1800 miles from the Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean. When those final rails were laid America changed forever.⁵⁰

Once the rails were in place, the ceremony officially began. The film portrays a crowd including dozens of Chinese laborers and several women and children. Historical accounts indicate that there were very few women and children, and that any Chinese laborers who were present would have likely remained in the shadows of the celebration. Nonetheless, *Into The West* offers a

⁵⁰ "Hell on Wheels" *Into the West*.

Golden Spike Ceremony that is, at first, inclusive of minorities; white and Chinese alike cheer the accomplishments of the UP and the CP. When officials begin to brag about the removal of the "Red Man" along the path of the railroad, however, the Chinese stop cheering, as do Abe (the Lakota/American man with a conscience) and Robert and Clara Wheeler (the white couple with a conscience). This speech marks a change in tone at the ceremony. No longer does the film acknowledge the accomplishment of building a transcontinental railroad; instead, the filmmakers use the ceremony as an opportunity to portray the negative aspects of the railroad, the racism of its leaders, and its cost to human life. As a railroad official drives in the last spike (another historical inaccuracy, as both companies' officials missed the spike, and an Irish worker was eventually called upon to complete the job), the scene switches to a shot of Loved By the Buffalo, the spiritual leader of the Native tribes, walking through an empty, burnt out village. When the camera returns to Promontory Summit, celebratory music is being played by a band, men are throwing their hats in the air, and the men – both white and Chinese – are climbing onto the locomotives to pose for a photograph.

Before the picture is taken, though, several white men demand that the Chinese laborers get out of the frame. Their voices are heard in the distance: "You pigs get down off that train. Get the real railroad men up here. All you pigs back up. Get down from those rails, you Chinese." The Chinese laborers dejectedly walk away from the crowd posing for the picture. Abe has sliced a small piece of wood from the last tie, and he hands half to Chow-Ping. "At least we got this to show for it," he says. "They can't ever take this away from us." The two friends say good-bye, and Abe exits, walking down the track into the distance. Robert and Clara Wheeler load up their wagon and take off for parts unknown. The Chinese laborers walk sadly out of the shot while drunken white men cheer atop the locomotives. The exit of Abe, the

Wheelers, and the Chinese men is significant, for it represents an exit of the American conscience. Throughout the film, Abe's family and the Robert Wheeler family have been shown to be thoughtful, responsible people who have a sense of right and wrong. Thus, as these individuals exit the scene at Promontory Summit, they, in effect, leave behind them a group of unprincipled, depraved individuals. Significantly, once the "conscience" has left the scene, the photograph is snapped, recording for all time the "historical" accounts of what happened on May 10, 1869. The film, however, has shown that "historical record" to be a distortion. Such subtlety is the exception in *Into the West*, and yet the railroad sequence goes far in addressing the complexities of railroad construction, politics in the nineteenth century, and the manufacture of some of our historical texts.

Little House on the Prairie, *Dr. Quinn* and *Into the West* each use a historical topic as a backdrop for addressing their contemporary audiences. These three programs offer models for what the American community should look like. The wholesome, white America of *Little House* is injected with diversity in *Dr. Quinn*. With *Into the West*, white America is forced to confront the skeletons of its past. In a sense, the *Into the West* miniseries has acted as a Remembrancer, exposing past injustices. Yet the miniseries also exposes the weaknesses of approaching history as a Remembrancer. American history has plenty of skeletons; but it is not exclusively "raggedy and bloody and screaming." In leaning so far to the side of the Remembrancer, *Into the West* tends to replace one binary with another. The roles of "good" and "bad" have swapped. But the binary still exists. Despite occasional glimpses of complexities in nineteenth-century America, the miniseries too often presents an image that feels just as simplistic and empty as that which was offered in the nineteenth century.

Conclusion

Many of the performative accounts of nineteenth-century railroad history found in twentieth and twenty-first century melodramas, museums, television programs, and plays fail to convey the complexities of that era, relying instead on generalizations and binaries. Some of these contemporary performances invoke the nineteenth-century rhetoric that praised the accomplishments of white Americans and ignored the contributions of ethnic laborers. Others overcompensate for the mistakes of the past, inverting historical narratives but maintaining a binary of heroes and villains, good and bad. This binarized history does have benefits. Such an approach to history and to performance highlights the often-overlooked experiences of marginalized individuals, establishing the value of their experiences outside of their relationship to non-marginalized groups. Yet much can be gained by moving beyond this binarized approach to the performance of history.

What might it take to create performative accounts of history that move beyond binaries? Perhaps the answer to that question requires me to abandon the model of history espoused by Burke, that of the Remembrancer. For by focusing on the skeletons at the exclusion of the glorious deeds of a people, the Remembrancer is also offering a distorted view of history, one that honors the silenced characters of history, but one that also encourages a divisive binary of "guilty" and "victims."

Given that performance is an ideal venue in which to explore multiple voices and bodies, it is ironic that performance still lags behind the historiographical shift away from binaries. Historiography has, to a large extent, embraced a more nuanced, complex analysis of studying history. New Historicism, in particular, invites multiple narratives and looks for examples of interconnectedness and shared experience. Binarized performances of history have helped to

raise awareness of marginalized groups; more nuanced performances of history, however, have the potential to redefine “unity” by emphasizing the complex connections between and within these marginalized (and non-marginalized) groups. Such a multi-faceted approach to the performance of history might ultimately foster a new understanding of unity in our world.

Chapter 6

“A Mingled Yarn”: Finding Unity in Difference

I began this project with Peter Burke's discussion of two approaches to history: the historian who acts as Herodotus, recording glorious deeds; and the historian who functions as a Remembrancer, exposing the skeletons from the past. As I've examined various performative texts of railroad history from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, I've observed how many of these performances, too, craft narratives that are grounded either in the grandness of Herodotus or the bloodiness of past wrongs. But performance, by its nature, allows for multiple voices and multiple perspectives. Why must these "multiple perspectives" be located within only one approach to history? What might a performance of history look like if it allowed multiple voices and multiple perspectives to speak for themselves by honoring both Herodotus and the Remembrancer?

Past generations have recognized complexity in life and have praised the strength that comes from nuance. Shakespeare wrote in *All's Well That Ends Well*: "The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together: our virtues would be proud, if our faults whipped them not, and our crimes would despair, if they were not cherished by our virtues."¹ For Shakespeare, the yarn is stronger because of its variations. The thread of history is not purely smooth and shiny (Herodotus) nor entirely rough and worn (the Remembrancer). Rather, it seems to me, the "web" of our history is of a "mingled yarn." The job of the historian, then, is to observe the ways in which many threads – some smooth, some jagged, some dark, some light – are woven into a single strand. The historian must be careful, however, not to dismiss the new strand as homogenized. Instead, she must look even closer, to "pull apart" the many smaller strands that spiral in and around one another, to identify how these threads compare to other threads in the

¹ AWW Act 4.3.68-71.

strand, and to finally allow the threads to co-exist within the same yarn. The author of Ecclesiastes (c. 1000 BCE) uses a similar metaphor in his/her observation that an idea gains strength from more than one perspective: "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."²

As a metaphor for approaching history, the "yarn" and the "cord" reveal more than merely the complexities of the human experience and the historian's record of the past. A "yarn" is a thread, but it is also a "tale" – a story. And just as a gifted storyteller can weave several yarns together, so can a historian interlace multiple "yarns" into a narrative of the past. Furthermore, "yarn" and "cords" serve a function. Yarn can be woven to create garments with which we express our identities and blankets under which we find warmth. Cords, too, can be used to connect things, and to anchor us to a specific location. By recognizing the multiple fibers within the cord of history, and by acknowledging the purposes served by this cord, the historian can better dissect past cords and preserve today's yarns for tomorrow's historians.

The cord – what actually happened in the past – is made up of many perspectives. Some historians have intentionally removed certain threads or have purposely woven the cord so that one thread predominates. The historian who revisits the past through the texts left behind by previous historians must work to pull apart and re-weave the multiple voices and multiple perspectives of the past into a "mingled yarn" that honors the complexity of the human experience, a yarn that begs for its textures to be explored. And a historian who records the present, the "history" of tomorrow, must strive to be a "keeper of the cord," to ensure that its intricacies are preserved.

Weaving History and Performance Into a More Inclusive Unity

In the writing of late nineteenth-century American railroad history, many groups have been pushed to the margins, including the Irish, Black, Mormon, and Chinese laborers who built

² Eccles. 4:12. Bible. NIV.

the first transcontinental railroad. Certainly there was not a single "Irish experience" or "Chinese experience." A performative account of the past should reflect this complexity of American history. Laurence Yep's 1991 play *Dragonwings* models such an approach to history. While it does not necessarily take into account the experiences of Irish, Black, and Mormon individuals, *Dragonwings* still offers an example of how performance can be used to reveal many of the textures found in the thread of American history.

David Henry Hwang's *The Dance and the Railroad* and Yep's *Pay the Chinaman* both perhaps opened the door to the kind of exploration we find in *Dragonwings*. Both of these earlier plays endeavor to tell American history from the margins, from the perspective of Chinese immigrants. In the telling of this history, *Dance* and *Pay the Chinaman* rely on Chinese characters. Lone, Ma, the Con Man, and the Young Man speak about whites and other non-Chinese characters, but these other members of society are not present on the stage. Yet, as Hwang himself writes in the introduction to his play, "If we neglect some of the communities which make up our society, our perception of the whole becomes a lie."³ America in the late nineteenth century was not a homogenous society, no matter how hard some politicians and artists may have wanted it to be. America was not made up only of mean white bosses; nor was it filled only with hard-working Chinese laborers.

Laurence Yep's play *Dragonwings*, however, offers a more complex picture of life in San Francisco at the turn of the century; it presents an image of American history that honors both the glorious feats of the era and the skeletons relegated to "the cupboard of social memory." The play, based on Yep's earlier novel of the same title, was commissioned by the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 1991 and was later featured at The Kennedy Center. Unlike Yep's earlier play, *Pay the Chinaman*, or Hwang's *Dance and the Railroad*, *Dragonwings* contains Chinese,

³ Hwang 7.

Chinese-American, and Caucasian-American characters. Additionally, the script calls for double-casting, meaning that an actor might play both Black Dog (a Chinese-American immigrant) and Tom (a white American teenager), or a mother in China and a kindly American lady, Miss Whitlow. While it is not stated in the script whether the actors should be of a certain ethnicity, the cast lists from the first three productions of the play indicate that the role of Black Dog/Tom was portrayed by an Asian actor, while the role of Mother/Miss Whitlow may have been performed by a Caucasian actress. This cross-racial casting accomplishes several things: First, it provides an onstage presence of both Chinese and Caucasian bodies, adding to the multiple perspectives explored in the script. Second, in the case of Black Dog/Tom, it offers an intriguing reversal of the casting practices in the nineteenth century, allowing an Asian actor to play "whiteface" rather than a white actor playing "yellowface." Finally, and perhaps most significantly, this cross-racial casting achieves a literal embodiment of unity, uniting in one body a divided community. In the vein of Anna Devere Smith, the casting in *Dragonwings* allows for a single body (the actor's) to unite previously dis-unified groups (i.e., Chinese and Caucasian-Americans). Bodies from the past are brought to life in a present body, inviting those of us in the present to examine and refigure past bodies to reveal them to be more interconnected, more entwined, and more unified than they have been represented the past.

Dragonwings tells the story of four Chinese-American men from the same family: Windrider; his son, Moon Shadow; his brother, Uncle Bright Star; and his nephew, Black Dog. Windrider, who was apparently a dragon in a former life, is attempting to build a flying machine, much like that created by the Wright Brothers. While these four men are from the same family, they are certainly unique individuals, and represent different experiences. Windrider is a dreamer, a man who loves the opportunity America presents and whose clothing reflects his

willingness to assimilate. Uncle Bright Star, on the other hand, fears the "white demons" and wants to build up a business in Chinatown so that he does not have to deal with the "demons." Black Dog represents the sub-population of Chinese immigrants who fell into opium addiction; he spends much of the play drugged, stealing money from his family and intentionally inflicting pain on them. Moon Shadow is a "FOB" – fresh off the boat; he is also the narrator of the play. *Dragonwings*, then, stages a version of history that is multi-faceted. It weaves together different textured threads, uniting them in a strong, variegated yarn.

In addition to portraying the varied experiences of Chinese immigrants, the play further presents a non-homogenous history by including multiple aspects of the white American experience at the turn of the century. Yep is careful to include the kinds of white Americans that constituted the majority of white Californians: the men who participated in the anti-Chinese movement and who prompted the name, "white demons." In the play, these white men participate in a drunken riot, singing:

Yellow monkeys, won't you come out tonight?
Come out tonight? Come out tonight?
Yellow monkeys, won't you come out tonight
And dance by the light of the moon?
Hey, Monkeys. We want your tails. Chop off their tails!⁴

The men have already cut off Black Dog's queue, making him a laughingstock in the community.

In retaliation, Black Dog cuts off Moon Shadow's queue, a classic example of transference.

Yep does not present white Americans as solely evil, however. He also includes three characters who are, at least by the end of the play, friends of the Chinese immigrants. Mr. Alger, initially skeptical of Windrider's ability to fix his "horseless wagon," eventually decides that the Chinese immigrant's skills easily best the skills of other mechanics in the city; he hires Windrider on as an assistant. Tom, a neighborhood teenager, first approaches Moon Shadow with the

⁴ Laurence Yep, *Dragonwings* (New York: Dramatists, 1993) 15.

attitude that he can push him around and make a game of dealing with him; Moon Shadow earns his respect, however, when he pokes Tom in the face and draws blood. Finally, Miss Whitlow, a kindly white lady who owns a house in Moon Shadow's new neighborhood, invites Windrider and Moon Shadow for tea. Windrider does his best to adhere to Miss Whitlow's customs during tea time; Moon Shadow, reluctant at first, eventually follows his father's lead and shows respect to Miss Whitlow and her culture. Miss Whitlow develops a friendship with both Chinese immigrants. During the Great Earthquake, Windrider ensures Miss Whitlow's safety. Later, when Windrider and Moon Shadow have lost all their money to Black Dog, Miss Whitlow provides assistance for the men in their effort to create a flying machine.

Thus, in his inclusion of many different kinds of people within each ethnicity and in his use of double casting, Yep has crafted a version of history that thrives on multiple and intertwined voices and experiences. In the end, the characters' experiences melt into one, a human experience: As the play ends, Miss Whitlow, Moon Shadow, and Uncle Bright Star help Windrider get his flying machine poised for lift-off. As Windrider takes flight, all three stare in wonderment at the sight of a man flying through the air.

MISS WHITLOW. Free as an eagle
UNCLE BRIGHT STAR. (*Correcting her*) Like dragon.⁵

How fitting that both characters have chosen a metaphor that is part of their national and ethnic identities: the eagle and the dragon. Uncle Bright Star's "correction" of Miss Whitlow's metaphor does not, ultimately, feel like a correction. For as the audience watches Miss Whitlow and Uncle Bright Star gaze in awe at Windrider's machine, they likely understand that both characters are right. Whether the metaphor is an eagle or a dragon, they have felt the same magic, witnessed the same feat, and experienced the same tingling sense of wonder. By writing

⁵ Yep, *Dragonwings* 42.

a play that acknowledges the complexities of white and Chinese communities in San Francisco, and by allowing white and Chinese-American characters to discover that they feel many of the same things, Laurence Yep has taken a big step in portraying a historical snapshot of turn-of-the-century America that contains varied faces, multiple stories, and, ultimately, hope for a future that finds more and more people included in the definition of "unity." For in this new understanding of "unity," we discover that unity does not necessarily mean that we are all the same and equal. Rather, "unity" can celebrate the interconnectedness of our lives and our histories, acknowledging that all perspectives and experiences are valuable and necessary to the whole.

The Past, the Present, and the Potential of Performance to Re-imagine America

Visual and aural images of the past have the potential to stay with a person longer than descriptions of history in textbooks. Whether in a museum, on a television screen, or in a theatre, performance offers the audience something tangible – a picture, a sound, an image that subsequently informs the viewer's re-creation of history within his/her own mind. Most of the nineteenth-century performative accounts of the railroad and of its laborers do not reflect the complex experience of the American frontier; instead, they offer distorted images for their audiences and for future generations. Nineteenth-century audiences found in these performances a distinct scripting of the events of the day. These scripts informed the way in which nineteenth-century Americans viewed themselves and the history they were living. Many accounts of the railroad in nineteenth-century America found in nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century museums, films, and plays fail to convey that the railroad simultaneously united and divided the nation, that the "promise" implied by the railroad was only sporadically kept, and that in the quest for "unity" our ancestors may have embraced too narrow a definition. By denying or

overshadowing the complexities of American history, past and present performative accounts of railroad history reflect and encourage a simplistic view of the past and the present. Such simplistic approaches to history and to the present prevent us from exploring the possibilities of a "unity" that is not defined by "sameness" but by interdependence, tolerance, and possibility.

Even as theatre historians pour over performative texts of the nineteenth century to find clues about American society, contemporary performers are scripting today's events, embedding clues for future generations to consider in their attempts to articulate our understanding of America and of unity. The threat of the "Mongolian Invasion" prompted significant political, legislative, and racial tensions during the last half of the nineteenth century, influencing the version of history that would be performed and preserved for the future. Nineteenth-century popular entertainments clearly participated in a larger contest to control the definition of "unity" in this country.

Currently, America faces new "invasions." With heated debates over border control and the War Against Terror, a new contest for "unity" is in full swing. What might "unity" look like in 2006 America? The American citizenry is not racially, ethnically, religiously, or politically homogenized. Where, then, do we find that which "unifies" us? Perhaps the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence have articulated that which unites us as a nation: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet, as we have seen in past and current eras, those rights have not been applied equally to all in our country. The "American Dream," too, provides a conceptual unity for some Americans. We are all part of a nation that praises and rewards those who take advantage of opportunities to better their circumstances. Yet, here, too, history has proven that not all "Americans" are entitled to such a dream.

Like in the nineteenth century, the definition of "unity" in 2006 America is tied into national security. In the nineteenth century, America's economy was threatened by immigrant labor. Today, our nation's economy and physical security are threatened by out-sourcing, illegal immigration, and terrorism. Self-appointed Minute Men guard the border between Mexico and the United States; the federal government has claimed a broader authority to eavesdrop on phone calls between American citizens and potential terrorists; and Americans continue to question the appropriate response to the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001. Add to this atmosphere of anxiety the oft-invoked divisions between "Red States" and "Blue States," and we are left with a nation negotiating not just what it means to be "American" in an era of globalization but also whether it is even possible for a divided citizenry to find common ground in a national identity.

What is the role of performance in this negotiation? Tomorrow's historians will study today's popular entertainment and theatre. They will look to the images we include and to the shadows of those we exclude. It is the responsibility of the artist to be a "keeper of the cord," to preserve the complexities of American life in the twenty-first century. It is hard to create an image of an event without bringing one's own agenda into the project. Therefore, it is vital for the artistic community to develop and encourage multiple voices and multiple perspectives. A community of writers, artists, and performers that is homogenized in race, political persuasion, religious identification, or social-economic status might find themselves presenting an interpretation of America that is similarly homogenized; they might also color future historians' interpretations of today's Americans, scripting for tomorrow a definition of "America" that does not necessarily reflect the diversity of our population.

Performance has the power to unite its audience by including multiple perspectives and by encouraging the audience to abandon divisive binaries. When playwrights, curators, and directors honor the complex, intertwined, and interconnected experiences of many people, and when they present a textured narrative that allows for different accounts of the same story, performance can be a powerful tool that leads the audience to a new understanding of history and of unity. Such inclusive, balanced creations subtly guide their audiences to the realization that the eagle and the dragon can exist side-by-side as metaphors, that these metaphors can both be part of "America" because they both come from the same place: a place of pride, of freedom, and of hope.

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Vita

Hailing from Dundee, Oregon, Elissa Sartwell received her Bachelor of Arts degree in communication arts (theatre emphasis) and writing/literature from George Fox University. She later received a Master of Arts in Teaching degree from the same institution. After teaching high school in the middle-of-nowhere Oregon, Elissa chose to pursue her love of theatre and of history. She will receive her doctorate in theatre from Louisiana State University in May 2006. Elissa looks forward to a life of teaching, directing, and writing, preferably near mountains.